

Let God be God
Judges 19:22-30; I Samuel 10:24–11:15

Introduction

[Read I Samuel 10:24–11:15]

[Play: "Let Bartlett be Bartlett Ending" video]

After his first quarter as President, Josiah Bartlett and his staff realized that they had surrendered their dreams for making a difference in the world, to fears of making waves, embarrassing themselves, and losing popularity. They were afraid of losing the white house, not being re-elected, and having to give up the wealth, prestige, and fame which they had worked so hard to gain. Self preservation and selfish ambition had replaced their original drive to serve humanity, and make America a better place to live. In the world of West Wing, they were able to re-focus by recognizing where their allegiance must lie. Bartlett himself had to re-align with his original aspirations, and the staff re-affirmed their commitment to "serve at the pleasure of the President!"

The God of creation has never wavered from his eternal aspirations, and God does not need to re-align himself with his divine commitments. Unlike the politicians of Hollywood or history, God has remained constant in his promises. However, like the Bartlett staff, God's **creatures** have **not** been so steadfast. We find ourselves eagerly signing on to God's agenda, with gratitude for the transformation and salvation he has wrought in our lives. However, before long we get caught up with concerns about what others think about us, and whether this Christian path really leads to the prosperity, notoriety, comfort, and pleasure which we seek for ourselves. As a result, we leave behind God's agenda and the advancement of His kingdom, for the sake of our own way and the advancement of our personal kingdom. Consequently, we find that our allegiance has subtly shifted and we forget at whose pleasure we serve!

Neglecting the King of Life

The book of Judges depicts such a deterioration of direction and allegiance. Though the book is full of ups and downs for the tribes of Israel; in general, each succeeding account in the book depicts more faithlessness than the one before. The later half of the book presents a mix of doubt, idolatry, child sacrifice, and selfish corruption. By the end of the book, the last two stories reflect such chaos and depravity, that all associations to God's leadership and his covenant plan are lost from view. The following excerpt taken from the last two accounts in Judges illustrates graphically the deterioration of life when God is neglected. I won't bother to set the scene for you, because it doesn't really matter. The larger context of the account only affirms the chaos reflected at the end of Judges.

[Explain: guest = Levite; town = Gibeah; then read Judges 19:22-30]

Allow me to summarize the rest of the story. In response to the perverse acts of the men of Gibeah and the call for justice sent out by the Levite whose concubine was raped and killed, the tribes of Israel all gathered to punish the men of Gibeah. However, the tribe of Benjamin defended the men of Gibeah, for Gibeah was a city within their tribe. As a result, civil war broke out in which all the tribes of Israel fought against their one brother tribe of Benjamin. Ironically, though vastly outnumbered, Benjamin defeated the other tribes of Israel in the first two battles, and killed a total of 40,000 Israelites! Finally, in the third battle, the tribes of Israel defeated Benjamin so soundly that only 600 men of Benjamin survived by hiding at the rock of Rimmon, in the wilderness. When the dust had settled, and Israel's mad quest for justice against Gibeah was fulfilled, the Israelites realized that they had nearly wiped out one of their own tribes. In fact, with only 600 men left, the tribe of Benjamin was headed for extinction.

The Israelites realized that women must be provided for their brothers in Benjamin in order to save the tribe. However, in the heat of anger, the Israelites had all sworn never to give their daughters in marriage to any man from Benjamin. So they sought out and discovered that there was one city within Israel who had not participated in the war against Benjamin. That city was Jabesh-gilead. The Israelites then killed everyone in Jabesh-gilead except for the young virgins, whom they kidnapped in order to give to the remaining men of Benjamin. The problem was that only 400 young virgins were taken from Jabesh-gilead, and therefore more women were needed for the 600 men of Benjamin. So the Israelites came up with an additional plan. The yearly festival at Shiloh was about to take place. The Israelites instructed their brothers from Benjamin to hide in the fields during the festival, and when the women came out to dance, the men of Benjamin were told to carry off a woman and take her as a wife. That way, the families of those women would not be guilty of **giving** their daughters to Benjaminites, because they were not "given," but were actually "taken."

So, this lovely biblical tale at the end of Judges begins with the threat of homosexual perversion, the rape of a Levite's concubine, and her murder. In retaliation, the story ends with the death of a total of 65,000 men in battle, the additional slaughter of the town of Jabesh-gilead, the kidnapping of 400 virgins from Jabesh-gilead, and the kidnapping of around 200 women from the fields surrounding Shiloh! This tale is surely destined to join the classic collection of bedtime-devotionals-for-children, drawn from the biblical text. Seriously, where are the prophetic voices in this account?! Where are the condemning and corrective words of the inspired narrator?! Where is the wrath of God demonstrating to Israel the chaos and wickedness of such actions?!

In place of loud and clear divine responses to this mayhem at the end of the book of Judges, the narrator provides us with two, almost hidden, comments. The **subtlety** of the comments practically serves to highlight them, in contrast to the surrounding madness. One comment appears between the final two accounts in the book of Judges. That is, it is placed before the story we just reviewed, and after the previous account which illustrates similar wickedness, selfish ambition and idolatry. The comment at Judges 18:31 merely indicates that these chaotic events were taking place while "**the house of God was at Shiloh.**" While selfish ambition, idolatry, immorality, perversion, murder, war, and kidnapping flood the countryside; meanwhile, "**the house of God is at Shiloh!**" The nearly silent statement stands out in contrast to the bedlam around it, such that it consequently screams for attention. Through this literary variance, the narrator communicates exactly what is wrong at the end of Judges: God has been neglected and set aside in Shiloh! The result of such disregard is made clear by the devastation which is depicted in the final two accounts in Judges. The warning cannot be more clear: life pursued without God readily deteriorates into madness.

The second statement, also very subtle, at least appears with a little more frequency. It appears near the beginning of the first of the final two accounts in Judges (18:1), then again between the final two accounts (19:1), and finally a third time as the last line of the entire book of Judges (21:25). In the first two instances, the statement reads, "**In those days there was no king in Israel.**" The final rendition of the statement completes the thought with the words, "**In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.**" Once again, the narrator uses contrast and irony to highlight the message, for **in reality**, there was a king in Israel, and that king was being rejected and neglected in Shiloh. As the Lord God later explains to Samuel, the last judge of Israel, "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (I Sam 8:7). Accordingly, the message is reinforced: life pursued without allegiance to God-as-King readily deteriorates into madness.

Serving the King of Kings

Moving ahead into the book of I Samuel, we find that the first act of Israel's first human king provides an alternative picture to the madness at the end of Judges. This contrasting image demonstrates obvious connections to the account at the end of Judges, and reflects the gracious and wondrous transforming power of God. To begin, God's choice for the first king of Israel was a man, from of all places, **Gibeah of Benjamin!** The first king of Israel, chosen by God, comes from the very city known for its perversion, and infamous in recent history as the catalyst for civil war, the slaughter of Jabesh-gilead, and the kidnapping of women. God's choice clearly underscores the powerful theme of transforming grace.

God can take even a person from Gibeah and transform that one into his chosen instrument. Likewise, God can transform even you and me for His great purposes!

Shortly after the official and public announcement that Saul of Gibeah was designated as the first king of Israel; an enemy, Nahash the Ammonite, attacked Jabesh-gilead. Yes, this is the same town whose men were killed and virgins kidnapped, due to the abomination which had taken place at Gibeah in Benjamin, at the end of the book of Judges. This time, an enemy named Nahash captured Jabesh-gilead, and threatened to gouge out the right eyeball of everyone in town. Jabesh-gilead was on the other side of the Jordan river and far to the north. The brand new, first-time, king of Israel was certainly not expected to trouble himself, or the nation, with the problems of a small group of people on the edge of the kingdom, across the river, far to the north. Saul had not yet established a palace, had not yet chosen a cabinet or advisors, and had not even assembled an army! In fact when news of this irritating dilemma in the North reached Saul, the text indicates that he was "coming from the field behind the oxen." Accordingly, instead of wearing warrior's boots marked with gashes and blood, he was likely wearing farmer's boots marked with manure and mud!

Nevertheless, when news of the crisis reached Saul, the biblical text reports an experience which defines God's concept of kingship for Israel. Verse 6 of I Samuel 11 indicates that **"the Spirit of God came upon Saul mightily!"** In contrast to the cries of the people for a "king like all the nations," God's idea of monarchy for Israel was grounded in a king ruled by the Spirit of God!

Saul's first move was to gather an army. He did so through rather unusual means. I am aware of only two places in the Bible where someone gathers an army by cutting up what was a living being into twelve pieces, and shipping them throughout the countryside with a message to come together for war. Saul does it here by cutting up oxen. This echoes the other, even more unusual, instance in which the Levite did the same by cutting up his concubine at the end of Judges. In the case of the Levite, an army is gathered, civil war ensues, and the people of Jabesh-gilead are destroyed. In Saul's case, the army is gathered, Nahash and the Ammonites are defeated, and the people of Jabesh-gilead are saved!

After the great victory, the people of Israel desire to kill some worthless Israelites who had initially opposed the kingship of Saul. However, Saul's response to the people further demonstrates God's concept of kingship. Saul states, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for **today the LORD has accomplished deliverance in Israel.**" Saul's statement points back to God as the true King and deliverer in Israel! Accordingly, the establishment of kingship in Israel begins with the affirmation that God is King, and the **human ruler is a servant of the true King, the Lord God!**

Conclusion

Clearly there is a significant contrast between the accounts at the end of Judges which indicate, "**In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes,**" and the account of the establishment of kingship in Israel as recorded in I Samuel. Nevertheless, the inspired writer highlights some obvious connections between the two accounts. Both stories involve the otherwise obscure towns of Gibeah and Jabesh-gilead. Also, these two accounts present the only two instances in the Bible where armies are gathered by cutting up body parts and shipping them to the twelve tribes of Israel. The texts are linked in order to drive home the message that God's people need to recognize God is, and has always been, the King of Kings! When we neglect that truth, and run life on our own, the result is chaos and madness. Yet, when we acknowledge God's sovereignty and submit to His authority, we can experience deliverance and prosperity in line with His kingdom purposes. We need to "let God be God!"

When my wife and I moved to Texas, we were 21 years old, had been married for two years, and had a one-year-old child. We had grown up in Oregon, and this was our first move out of state, as adults. As we drove down interstate 35 and the Ft. Worth skyline came into view, I was overwhelmed with a sense of dread. We were moving to a strange land, we only knew one other family in the entire state, I was taking on a new job at a new church, and I was nervous about attending a new school and the demands of a seminary education. We learned to depend on God, and over time, everything fell into place. All we had to do was "let God be God."

After completing seminary, we moved again, this time with two young children, to the, open-24-hours-a-day, city of Las Vegas, in the barren land of Nevada. We were moving to work at a church, in a city where we weren't even sure they had churches! Again I was overwhelmed with the stress of a new place, not knowing anyone in town, facing a new job, and securing a new home. We learned to depend on God and follow His lead. We had to "let God be God."

A couple of years later, now with three children, we made the move to California to complete the final installment of formal education. Once again, the anxiety of a foreign land, not knowing anyone else in town, finding a new home, securing new jobs, and tackling greater demands at school threatened to overwhelm us. The day we first moved into our apartment in Concord, a young boy greeted us on the sidewalk waving a knife and warning us that we better be careful, because this is a rough neighborhood. The complex where we lived included a number of gangs and multiple languages. There were shootings in the area, bloody fights steps from our door, and needy neighbors suffering from brokenness and abuse.

Despite the surrounding chaos, God empowered us to minister to others, and He carried us through eight years there, as I commuted to school in Bezerkely (Gibeah). We even created joyful memories, as we learned to "let God be God!"

After interviewing for a position here at Nazarene Bible College, I flew out a second weekend to secure housing and prepare for the move. On the flight back to California, as I contemplated the upcoming move to Colorado and the start of a career, I was once again overwhelmed with uncertainty and a sense of inadequacy. Sitting alone in my row on the plane, I looked out the window and began to cry. Flying west, late in the evening, the sky was black and empty, except for a striking ribbon of sunset on the western horizon. The ribbon was deep crimson, almost vermillion, red. The ribbon appeared as a stream of blood in the midst of dark blackness. I was reminded of the shedding of Christ's blood for a dark world. The Lord's assurance and comfort gripped me with the strong affirmation in the words, "I love you; I died for you." All I had to do was "let God be God!"

Your own circumstances are subject to all types of chaos and brokenness, anxiety and uncertainty. We must avoid the temptation to take matters into our own hands, and to live **as if there is no king in the land, and we should do what is right in our own eyes**. On the contrary, there is a King over heaven and earth, who loves you, and wants to direct your life! Let us reign over our lives as servants of God, ruled by the Spirit of God. Surrender to Him, and "let God be God!"