

THE 'WAITING – ROOM' SERIES

Tan Sin Liang

3. SAUL'S 'WAITING-ROOM' EXPERIENCE **Theme: Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice**

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Background to Saul's Appointment As King Of Israel

Israelites Rejected God & Wanted A King

Thus far, Israel had been ruled by Judges chosen by God. Samuel was the resident Judge, priest and prophet at that time. The Israelites wanted to change God's form of government for 2 reasons. First, they did not like Samuel's sons because they were ungodly, greedy and corrupt, abusing their positions as priests (1 Sam 8:3). Secondly, because other nations have kings, so Israel should also have kings.

So the elders complained to Samuel and demanded a King. Samuel was displeased with their request. But God comforted Samuel: "Do everything they say to you, for it is me they are rejecting, not you. They don't want me to be their king any longer.....Do as they ask, but solemnly warn them the way a king will reign over them". (1 Sam 8:6-9)

So Samuel warned the Israelites of the dangers in having a human king like other nations (see 1 Sam 8:10-17). His final warning: "When that day comes, you will beg for relief from this king you are demanding, but then the Lord will not help you. But the people refused to listen to Samuel's warning. "Even so, we still want a king" they said. We want to be like other nations around us. Our king will judge us and lead us into battle" (1 Sam 8:18-20).

Consequence of Bad Kings

True to God's warning through Samuel, the Israelites would eventually pay a terrible price for wanting kings instead of Judges appointed by God. Israel would soon suffer under many bad kings (after king David and Solomon) who would lead Israel to sin against God. Eventually, because of these sinful kings, God allowed Israel to be invaded by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Not only were they taken captives, they were exiled to Assyria and Babylon. In the end, the Israelites lost their homeland. That was the ultimate price Israel paid for demanding a king to rule over them.

Samuel Anoint Saul As King

It is against this backdrop, a king was chosen to lead Israel. The circumstances how Saul was appointed king of Israel was a rather curious one. Saul was sent by his father to look for a missing donkey and he ended up as the appointed king of Israel. The search for the missing donkey led him to Samuel's house to inquire about his missing donkey. But God had already told Samuel the previous day, "*About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him to be the leader of my people, Israel*" (1 Sam 9:16). When Samuel saw Saul, God told Samuel that he was the man, "*That's the man I told you about! He will rule my people*" (1 Sam 9:17). Samuel told Saul what God said to him. Saul could not believe it.

Anointing of A King

In those days, when a king was appointed he must be anointed. The coronation was merely a political act but the anointing was a religious act of making the king God's representative to the people. Also, the king must be anointed by a priest or a prophet, like Samuel. The priest/prophet would anoint the king with a special mixture of olive oil, myrrh etc. on his head, symbolising the presence and power of the Holy Spirit of God in his life. This anointing ceremony was to remind the appointed king of his responsibility to lead the people by God's wisdom and not his own.

Samuel Anointed Saul

So Samuel invited Saul into his home in Ramah and anointed him by pouring a flask of olive oil over his head. Samuel kissed Saul and said, "*I am doing this because the Lord has appointed you to be the ruler over Israel.....*" (1 Sam 10:1)

Accident Or God's Appointment?

So Saul went looking for a missing donkey and ended up as the anointed king of Israel. Was this an accident or God's appointment? God merely used the missing donkey as the circumstance to lead him to Samuel to anoint him king of Israel. It was obviously God's appointment, not an accident.

Sometimes God used various circumstances in our lives to lead us to Himself. As a Christian we believe in the Lordship of Christ, nothing happens by chance. There is no accidents but god's appointment. Our 'waiting-room' experiences are not accidents but God's appointment. That does not necessarily mean God caused them but God allowed them.

Saul Elected King By Israelites

What happened in Samuel's house in Ramah was merely a 'private anointment'. Since the Israelites wanted a king, God allowed them to elect a man of their own choosing to be their king. So Samuel called all the tribes of Israel to meet at Mizpah to choose among themselves a king.

After casting of lots, (first by choosing the tribe, then the family), Saul was eventually elected the king of Israel. However, there was a problem. The 'King' was missing! First, the donkey was missing. Now the king was missing. On the day Saul was appointed king of Israel, he decided to put on a 'disappearing act'. He performed such a good 'Hoodini act' that, although everyone went looking for him, he could not be found. Eventually they found him (with God's prompting) hiding among the baggages. What does that say about Saul's character? So Saul, at 30 years old, was elected King of Israel and he ruled Israel for 42 years (1 Sam 13:1). But those 42 years reign were fraught with treachery and murderous plots (to kill David) and tragedy.

Why Did They Choose Saul?

Why was Saul chosen? He was from the smallest tribe of Benjamin and the least known clan in the Benjamin tribe. Perhaps it was his physical appearance. He was described as "the most handsome man in Israel-head and shoulder taller than anyone else in Israel" (1 Sam 9:2). When Saul was 'fished-out' of the bag he was hiding in, the Bible described him that "he stood head and shoulders above anyone else" (1 Sam 10:23). So that must have been quite a big bag. In other words, Saul may have been chosen because of his physical attributes. It would prove to be the wrong criteria because God does not judge a person by his appearance or height (1 Sam 16:7). So how do you judge a person?

Who Appointed Saul As King? God Or The Israelites?

This is a perplexing question and there is no easy answer. If you follow the sequence of events in chapter 10, you will see that Samuel, on God's instruction, anointed Saul before the Israelites elected him king of Israel. So the anointing took place before the election. So who appointed Saul king of Israel? The answer is both. God, in His divine knowledge, foreknew the Israelites' choice; so He pre-ordained Saul to be king. The Israelites did not know this. So they independently chose Saul. God merely affirmed the Israelites' choice (before they made the choice). Let's not forget. Our God is an omniscient God, He is all knowing.

Do you ever feel the same in your life? Sometimes after a critical event took place, we ask ourselves: "Did I made the choice or was it God's who prompted me to make that decision"? I see this happening in my life on so many occasions. When God prompts, he also affirms.

Saul's 'Waiting-Room' Experience

The first test Saul had to undergo in becoming a king was a 'waiting-room' situation. On the day Samuel anointed Saul, he told Saul to wait for him in Gilgal. He will be there in 7 days. Why? To perform the burnt offerings and the peace offerings. Perhaps this was to complete the anointing process earlier.

This was Samuel's instruction to Saul: "...go down to Gilgal ahead of me, I will join you there to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. **You must wait for 7 days until I arrive** and give you further instruction." (1 Sam 10:8)

So the instructions was clear. Where to wait? Gilgal. Wait how long? 7 days. Why? To perform peace offerings and burnt offerings.

In between Saul's anointing in Ramah and his appointment with Samuel in Gilgal, Saul had to fight a war against the Philistines. Saul and his army in Gilgal started to flee and hid in caves and rocks before the battle began because they were afraid of the Philistines. So Saul stayed in Gilgal with his men trembling with fear.

This is what happened: "Saul waited there 7 days for Samuel, as Samuel had instructed him earlier, but Samuel still didn't come. Saul realised that his troops were rapidly slipping away. So he demanded, "Bring me the burnt offering and the peace offerings!" And so Saul sacrificed the burnt offering himself. Just as Saul was finishing with the burnt offering, Samuel arrived. Saul went out to meet and welcome him, but Samuel said, "What is this you have done?" Saul replied, "I saw my men scattering from me, and you didn't arrive when you said you would, and the Philistines are at Micmash ready for battle. So I said, 'The Philistines are ready to march against us at Gilgal, and I haven't even asked for the Lord's help! So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering myself before you came" (1 Sam 13:8-12)

"How foolish!" Samuel exclaimed, "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you. Had you kept it, the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom must end, for the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart. The Lord has already appointed him to be the leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command" (1 Sam 13:13-14)

Whose fault was it? Was Samuel late?

This is one of the most perplexing passages in the Bible. Was it Samuel's fault? Was Samuel late? Let's look at the text (verse 8). There are several versions: "but Samuel still didn't come" (NLT). "He waited 7 days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal".

The question is: Was Samuel late? There are 3 possible interpretations. First, on the plain reading of the text, it would appear Samuel was late. Second interpretation is that, Samuel might have appeared on the 7th day but not according to the time Saul expected on that day because the instruction in 1 Samuel 10:8 (“You must wait for 7 days until I arrive...”) did not specify the time on the 7th day. The problem is during those days people don’t wear watches. There were no mobile phones and smart phones. Saul could not text or ‘WhatsApp’ Samuel, “Hey, Sam. Are you coming or not? I’m here in Gilgal. Where r u?” And Samuel could not reply, “I’m coming. Don’t touch those sacrifice offerings! That’s a ‘no’, ‘no’ Ok?”

Third interpretation, refer to Samuel’s instruction to Saul in 1 Sam 10:8 again. There are 2 conditions in Samuel’s instruction: (i) “wait for 7 days”, (ii) “until I arrive...” So Saul was supposed to wait for 7 days and wait until Samuel’s arrival. Saul did not fulfil the second condition.

Let us assume Samuel was late. He did not turn up on the 7th day. So on the 8th day, Saul performed the “D.I.Y” (‘do it yourself’) burnt offering. Would that have justified Saul’s action? Would that exonerate or absolve him from all blame? From Samuel’s response to Saul, God did not think so. In God’s eyes, the issue was not about timing. It was something bigger, more serious. In God’s eyes, Saul, in offering the burnt offerings himself, he had clearly disobey God’s command. So the issue was not about timing but about obedience.

Saul’s Disobedience & Consequence

Saul, as an Israelite, should know that all burnt offerings and peace offerings can only be made by a priest. He knew full well that he was not the right person to perform such a sacrifice to God. Yet he went ahead and did it. By performing such a religious act, which he had no authority to do so, Saul showed utter contempt of God. In other words, he had no respect for God’s law, whatsoever. Because Saul rejected God’s command, God rejected Saul as king (1 Sam 15:22). It was because of this one single reckless act of “foolishness”, King Saul would lose his kingdom (means his kingdom would end with him, his son, Jonathan, would not succeed him). We know from the Bible, Jonathan was killed in battle together with Saul.

One foolish rash act can destroy you

The same is true in life. How many murders do you need to commit before you are sentenced to death? Just one. One foolish rash act can cause you to lose your job and destroy your career. My son discovered that recently. And it almost destroyed his life. One foolish rash act of adultery can destroy your marriage and your family. King David committed only one act of adultery with Bathsheba,

it destroyed himself, his family and his kingship. Through one foolish rash act, Saul would lose his kingdom (even before he started to reign).

So Saul went through a 'waiting-room' experience of 7 days and he failed. His failure cost him his kingdom. What a tragedy.

What can we learn from Saul's failed 'waiting-room' experience?

There are several lessons we can learn.

(i) Obedience is better than sacrifice

Saul made the sacrifice of burnt offering but it was rejected by God. What God wanted from Saul was not his sacrifices but his obedience. This is what Samuel said in his last speech to Saul (after this, Samuel would never see Saul again) (1 Sam 15:35).

*"What is more pleasing to the Lord; your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! **Obedience is better than sacrifice**".* (1 Sam 15:22).

Likewise for us. We can make 'sacrifices' by donating money to church projects, perform worthy social projects, help the poor, the needy, the sick etc. But are we leading obedient lives in God's eye? Are we 'walking' closely with God? God is more interested in who we are to Him than what we do. God is more interested in the real person inside us.

Disobedience and unrepentance

Not only was Saul disobedient to God's command, he was also unrepentant. Instead of repenting after he disobeyed God, he blamed Samuel for failing to turn up on time. ("...you didn't arrive when you said you would..."). He then added further insult to injury with this excuse: "So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering myself....". So "it is all your fault, Samuel". He blames others but not himself.

My son's Wrong Choice

Against our advice, our other son refused to serve in the Singapore army before he went to US to study. For that reason, his 'PR' status was revoked by the Singapore government. Today he's not allowed to work or study in Singapore. He could not study in Malaysia (his home country) because he does not speak the local language (Bahasa Malaysia). He has great difficulty finding a job there because he can't speak Malay or Mandarin. So he's stuck in Malaysia today.

He applied to study in Canada and was accepted by a university in Canada. However, the Canadian government refused to grant him a visa to study. No reason was given. So he applied to study in Australia and was accepted by a university in Australia. Again, the Australian government refused to grant him a study visa on the ground that he was not a 'bona fide' student. So he has nowhere to go. That is why he is stuck in Malaysia today.

So be careful in what you insist of God. There are consequences for the choice we make. Sometimes the consequence is irreversible.

(ii) God's delays are not God's denials

Sometimes God wants to test us by making us wait for his divine timing. God's timing is never wrong. He is never too early or too late.

(i) My 'Waiting-room' experience in London

After I completed my LLM degree in University London, I was hoping to work in a law firm in London. I tried for an entire year. I 'knocked at every door'. But none of the doors opened. I was so bent on what I wanted to do, I was completely blind to God's will. I was moving ahead of God but God was not moving. After 'wasting' an entire year, I decided to look for a job in Singapore. That year in London was one of the lowest periods of my life; lonely and miserable. However, although I wasted 1 year in London, my wife gained an extra year experience as the European auditor for her company which eventually helped her to secure her job in Singapore.

(ii) My 'waiting-room' experience in Singapore

So I returned to Singapore to look for a job as a lawyer. I must have sent about 100 job applications. None was successful. So I waited for half year knocking on every 'door' I could find. Again none opened. Until one day we approached a friend, whose husband was a senior executive in a bank, for help. I gave her my CV. I never heard a word for another 3 months. So here I am. Sold my house and my law practice in Kuantan to pay for my studies. Came back to Singapore with a Masters degree, jobless for 9 months. If my London 'waiting-room' experience was bad, my Singapore 'waiting-room' experience was even worse.

At the end of the 3rd month, I was called for an interview by DBS Bank. They gave me the job as one of the Legal Counsels. A few months later, the Head of the Legal Department resigned, I was promoted to take his place. It was as if the position was reserved for me. That year, I had a double promotion!

I learned later on in my job that one of the reasons why I got the job was because of what I studied in my LLM course in London ('International

Banking'). So it was as if God had prepared me for this job in the bank. This, in turn, helped me to specialise in what I practise today.

Looking back, God's timing was perfect. God's delay is not God's denial.

(iii) Failure need not be final

So Saul failed in his 'waiting-room' experience after 7 days. But, as Sir Winston Churchill said, "**Failure is not final**". Saul could have repented, perhaps God might not have punished him so harshly.

In life we do fail. But **failure need not be final. God can redeem us of our failure.**

My failure & God's redemption

Lawyers who studied law in the local university in Singapore take 4 years to graduate. I took 5 years. Because I failed my first year. I was given a second chance to repeat my 1st year law because my tutor-mentor (who believed in me) fought for me in the senate hearing and convinced them to give me a second chance. On hind sight, I believe it was God who gave me the second chance through my mentor. **After that year, I made sure I never failed again. That is what I call "success". Success, is learning not to fail again. That's true success.**

Yes, I did suffer failure in my earlier years as a student, but that did not prevent me from becoming a lawyer today. I went on to do a PH.D programme (I gave up because I ran out of money). It didn't stop me from becoming a specialist in my area of law practice today. Looking back, my failure did not do me a great harm because God helped me. So **failure need not be final. To me, failure is the foundation of success.**

God's redemption for my son

I'm glad to share that my son who is stuck in JB has finally found a job where he is not handicapped by his deficiency in Malay and Mandarin language. He was offered a job where everything is in English. Please pray for him that he will be able to keep this job. This is God's redemption.¹

He has been through a long 'waiting-room' experience. He has suffered a lot and so have we (for the past many years) because he took all his frustrations on us. It has been the most difficult period of our lives

¹. Post script. My son lost this job after 1 month. He is now looking for a job in Malaysia. So his long 'waiting-room' experience continues.

(worse than the heart operation and cancer Ethel and I had to deal with). We fought many battles with him (with no winners). We went down on our knees and prayed to God to change our son. Every day I prayed to the Lord to change my son.

But do you know what happened as we prayed? I found that God was beginning to change me instead! God gave me the wisdom not to fight every battle but to choose to fight the battles that were worth fighting (i.e. the ones that really matters). As I began to adopt this strategy, I discovered another amazing thing. I discovered that I now have less battles to fight!

He is not 'out of the woods' yet. We are still praying for God's redemption for him.