

## **THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD**

**A sermon by Thomas R. Henry**

**June 14, 2009**

**TEXT: I Samuel 15: 34- 16: 13**

*"There, but for the grace of God, go I."* Have you ever said that? Or heard it being said? Have you ever thought those words inside your head as you passed a panhandler on the street? Or seen someone with a debilitating disease? Have you ever felt those words in your heart as you watched yet another story on the nightly news about a child being shot to death, a victim of violence?

On the one hand, thinking and saying something like that is an expression of gratitude, a way of recognizing our dependence upon God; that ultimately our lives are in God's hands. But on the other hand, thinking and saying some variation of *"There, but for the grace of God, go I"* is not too much different from praying that God will make it possible for my kids' soccer team to win over the other team, not thinking that there are young kids on that other team, too. Or singing "God bless America" with the misunderstanding that we are God's chosen nation, over and against all others. No doubt some of you who are connected to me on Facebook thought something like that this week as a hacker sent out rude, lewd and lascivious messages in my name!

*"There, but for the grace of God, go I."* There are many variations on that theme. One of these I heard just last week when the Air France flight went down over the Atlantic. A passenger who had missed the flight said, "By the grace of God, I was late for that flight. God was with me.." And I had to wonder why God wasn't with the 228 others who died.

I thought of these things as I read the scripture for this Sunday. It is from the first book of Samuel. Samuel was a prophet and a judge, living about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, at a time when the little nation of Israel decided that it wanted to be like all of the other nations. It wanted to be like the big guys. Israel wanted to have a king. It was Samuel who anointed Saul, as God's chosen one, to be the first king. However, according to the biblical account, King Saul later lost favor with God, and Samuel was then instructed to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to be the new king.

In the portion of the story that was read today, it was the young David who was the chosen one. David, the kid who gained fame by killing the giant Goliath with his slingshot, was chosen secretly by Samuel. After this moment of choice, the stories of political intrigue began. First, David came to Saul, in a seemingly innocent way, to soothe Saul's rages with music. Then, the intrigue grew as David gained more and more favor with the people, and Saul became more and more jealous, angry and insane. Finally, Saul lost and David won. Saul died by his own hand, with his own sword, and David was crowned king.

If the biblical account from Samuel is to be taken as it seems, then God was rejecting Saul and withdrawing favor from him. God was choosing one person over the other; and God was actually using David to drive Saul insane.

As the story reads, it looks like Saul had been set up, by God, to lose. In one of the final chapters of the story, Samuel the prophet, God's mouthpiece, told Saul not to go into battle until he met him at a certain place at a certain time. Saul waited at that place. He waited and he waited. But Samuel did not show up. So Saul went on into battle. "Aha!" said Samuel, "You

disobeyed me and therefore you disobeyed God." Later, Samuel declared simply that Saul had been replaced by "a man after God's own heart." Saul's crazy behavior that is recorded in scripture and his raging jealousy of David are explained as "the withdrawal of God's favor from Saul."

Is this the way God works? If so, then indeed *there, but for the grace of God, go I*. If so, then the person who missed the airplane that went down is one of God's favorites and all the others who made the flight are chopped liver. If so, then Saul and David and even Samuel are nothing more than pawns in a game that is being played by God.

That is one popular interpretation, but let's look at the biblical events in another way. If we take as a basic core belief some words of the Apostle Paul, written to Christians in Rome, that "God works in all things for good with those who love God and are called according to God's purpose," then the biblical events, as well as the events in our lives and in our world, can be interpreted differently.

Rather than believing that God manipulated one king out of power and another king into power, on some kind of divine whim, could it be that God, as the Creative Spirit in the Universe, took the very real political situation of the time and worked within it for eventual good? In other words, that God didn't create the situation, but God created the good that eventually came from it. Samuel, you see, was not only a prophet. He was also a politician. He became a king-maker and a king breaker. (We still have those around.) He had power. It is not hard to believe, then, that the political situation was one of human manipulation and posturing for power, much as it is today. Saul, the king, was powerful. Samuel, the prophet, was powerful. Samuel, working behind the scenes, secretly anointed David as the next king. The game was being played, and the score was: Saul-0, Samuel-1. Within that game of political intrigue, God was working for good for the future..

God's ways are not our ways. I don't believe that God sets one person up to fail and another to succeed. There are no throwaway lives in God's realm. But God does have a will and a purpose for this world within the universe. God works for the good of the whole earth, and that may or may not seem, in any one instance, to be good for you or for me. We much prefer to believe that God is always pitching for our team, but we only prefer to believe that if we are on the winning team! We find it gratifying to think *there, but for the grace of God, go I* only if we are not one of the ones being pointed at when someone says those words.

In terms of morality and ethical behavior, a belief in a God who always pitches for my team encourages moral arrogance. There is a lot of good in some of the popular religious and quasi-religious movements that mix psychology, sociology and theology together, and work to undo the crippling effects of guilt that have been fostered by some traditional religion. But there are also some basic flaws in those movements which lead many believers, not to God and to God's purpose, but back to themselves, to an ultimate belief in themselves. Quite honestly some guilt-liberated people I know are now convinced that it is OK to be self-centered snots! God loves us, but God doesn't always like us just the way we are!

Churches have been caught up in this false belief, too, preaching at times that one race is better than another; that the color of one's skin makes one deserving of special privilege; that one gender is destined to be more powerful; that one's sexual orientation is a sign of God's favor or disfavor; that poor is bad and rich is good. Or vice versa. And that after the "revolution" whatever the revolution of the moment might be - economic, political, sexual or environmental - all will be peace and tranquility.

The Apostle Paul better understood the ways of God and humanity. "God works for good..." From our very human perspective, all that we interpret as good is good for someone or good for something, mostly good for me. Endless days of sunshine, with nary a drop of rain in sight, are differently interpreted by the beach goer and the farmer.

When we are spared disease or disaster, it is not because God favors us more than the ones to whom we point and say: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." When we are hit by disease or disaster, it is not because we are expendable in God's sight. Sometimes, in fact, the good that we do may be done because we have known disease, distress or disaster. (That seems to be the case in the life of Koko Taylor, Queen of the Blues, who died this past week.)

God can work with us and for us for good no matter what our earthly condition may be. In all conditions, what we have to keep ever before us is the truth that God really does not withdraw from us. Even though we may experience what we think is God's withdrawal, it is, in fact, we who are withdrawing from God. God's spirit is ever-present, even when we are in the midst of disaster or disease. It is we who create the void.

I do not believe that God withdrew from King Saul, even though that is how it appeared, and that is how the writer of the first book of Samuel interpreted it. It was Saul who withdrew from God as he became more arrogant, angry and then jealous, insanely jealous of David. His jealousy led to his insanity and his death. He could have played his cards differently in the political game, but he did not. God worked for good with Saul's insanity and with David's popularity. God worked for good within the political posturing for power to bring about a renewed nation of Israel, from which one day would come the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, descendent of David.

It could have all gone differently. If Saul had acted differently, the history that led to Jesus might have been a different history. The Bible might have carried a different story. But it would have been God's story nevertheless...as God worked for good within the creation and agony of that day and those lives.

And so it continues to be God's story as God works for good within the creation and agony of our day and our lives. Along the way there will be good days and good times, and bad times, too. But in the end it will all be good. Because God works for good in all things.

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### **Text for Sermon**

### **I Samuel 15:34 - 16:14**

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified

Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When Jesse and his sons came to the sacrifice, Samuel looked on Jesse's son, Eliab, and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And Samuel said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."

Then, Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."

Jesse sent and brought in his youngest son. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.