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SLEEPING IN THE TEMPLE

Samuel was just a child in the service of God as overseen by the High Priest Eli. He had been dedicated to God by his mother, as she had promised in a prayer, so he was living with the priests. Most translations of 1 Samuel 3:3 say that after Eli began losing his sight but before the enemies of Israel had overtaken the land, Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the Lord, where the ark was. Why was he sleeping there?

The first question, really, should be where was there? The passage specifically mentions the “temple” or dwelling place of the Lord. This was up to eighty years before the building that is typically called the Temple was built. It could not, then, be Solomon’s Temple. There is a separate word, though, for the Tabernacle or tent constructed in the wilderness. This is the first use of the word *hakal* in scripture. The Tabernacle was usually referred to by the word *mishkan* (dwelling place) or *ohel* (tent). In fact, the former word was specifically used in the previous chapter to refer to the place where the priests worked. So was Samuel sleeping in the Tabernacle, or a separate building?

The verse also specifies that it was “where the ark was.” While there are arks of varying sizes and importance in the Bible, the implication is that this was the Ark of the Covenant. That, in itself, makes it clear that Samuel was asleep in the Tabernacle. Why would he, or anyone, sleep in that holy place?

Earlier in the book, Samuel’s mother “lent” him to the Lord for life. He ministered to the Lord in the presence of Eli (3:1). This, in itself, is unusual. Only the descendants of Levi were to serve in the Tabernacle and to make sacrifices. Here is Samuel, an Ephrathite (either a descendant of Ephraim or of Bethlehem in the territory of Benjamin), serving in the Tabernacle. King Saul didn’t wait for Samuel to offer a sacrifice, but did so himself. He lost his throne because of that, and yet Samuel (possibly of the same tribal line as Saul) was authorized to offer the same sacrifices. (1 Sam 13) Perhaps it is because of his being lent to the Lord for life that he was authorized to enter the Tabernacle and make burnt offerings. Whatever his lineage, he was ministering to the Lord, which would mean his sleeping place was in the tabernacle.

Another clue might be in the reference in the early part of the verse. This was “before the lamp of God went out.” That phrase probably refers to the Philistine conquest of Israel, when they would have suspended the worship of God. Nevertheless, it may give a reason for Samuel’s presence. The Law of Moses required that the lampstand in the Tabernacle be kept burning from evening to morning. (Lev 24:4) As part of his ministry, Samuel may have had the responsibility for the lamps. As a youth, he may not have been expected to stay awake all night, and so was allowed to sleep in the Tabernacle. As long as he made sure the lamps stayed burning, he might be allowed to sleep.

Whatever Samuel’s reason for sleeping there, we can know two things. First, God spoke to Samuel as he slept where he did. This is at least a tacit approval of Samuel’s sleeping in the temple. Sometimes we are quick to judge people for doing things that we think should be wrong. God does not necessarily agree with our standards. Some might say that Samuel had no business being where he was, and even less business sleeping there. God didn’t say, “Samuel, what are you doing here?” He only said, “Samuel.”

Second, there are some circumstances in which someone from other than the tribe of Levi was allowed to fulfil the priestly offices. This gives Christians hope. “For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood.” (Heb 7:14) Circumstances allow our High Priest to serve in our stead. Without those circumstances, we have no forgiveness.

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WHAT'S YOUR EXCUSE?

Don't give me excuses, give me reasons. You can give a whole list of excuses, but you only need one reason. I'd rather hear a simple "no" than any number of excuses.

We say we don't like excuses, but everybody has them. And uses them. Maybe we are just too embarrassed to tell somebody that watching a baseball game on TV is more important than they are (which is probably true). Maybe we want to appear busier or smarter than we really are. Rather than just bowing out gracefully, we have to make an excuse. The problem is, excuses are usually pretty transparent. The person to whom you give it can usually see right through it. Instead of making you look better, they make you look foolish. At least, that is what preachers and teachers have been saying for years about the excuses given in one of the parables of Jesus.

Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen,

They would buy a ham in a burlap sack. When they got home they would find it was really rabbit, or dog, or cat.

and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper. (Lk 14:16-24)

The host in this parable saw the excuses for what they were: a slap in the face. These people not only did not have the grace to refuse him ahead of time, but they

stooped to lame excuses. No wonder he made sure to fill the room with the "dregs" of humanity, just in case somebody changed his mind. How did he know he was being disrespected? Just look at the excuses.

I bought a lot

"I bought a piece of ground, and I have to go see it." Why would he want such a person as a friend anyway?

"I know you invited me to your party a month ago, but there was this deal on a bridge in Brooklyn that I just couldn't pass up. It came up at the last minute. I paid for it, and now I can't wait to see what I bought. No, it can't wait a few days, or even a few hours. I have to make sure I wasn't cheated."

OK. Maybe the host would want someone like this around. Just think how much he could make selling bridges, or land in the Florida Everglades, or an island by the name of Alcatraz. With friends like this he could afford to party all the time.

How much more disrespectful can you get? A bogus land deal is more important than a friendship?

And yet, how many people make similar excuses? I can't come on Friday because that's the day I wash my hair. Something just came up (but I hope you don't ask me what it was).

The implication in the parable is that the host had sent out invitations well ahead of time. This guy just seems to have forgotten, and has to come up with an excuse.

We laugh at the old joke that gets resurrected on sitcoms. "Can you come to my party?" "Sorry, I'm busy that day." "But I haven't even told you what day it is." "Doesn't matter. I will be busy."

We laugh, but sometimes we do so with a bit of recognition in the laughter. Maybe recognition of someone we know. Maybe recognition of someone we see in the mirror.

Testing my oxen

Have you ever heard of buying a pig in a poke? In most countries the expression is a variation on "buying (or selling) a cat in a bag." It means the same thing. It dates back to the Middle Ages. Sometimes meat was scarce, and marketers could not get the good ham. Instead, they would advertise ham wrapped in a burlap sack. When the buyer got home and opened it, he might find a rabbit (if he's lucky) or a dead dog or cat. Or the seller might advertise it to his Jewish clients as beef, but then sell them a pig, knowing that they couldn't eat it.

This excuse maker had bought a pig in a poke. He had the used car lot deliver a clunker, and then did the test

drive after he paid the price. Even worse, he had bought five cars, all of them potential clunkers.

Surely he knew that making this excuse would show him to be a liar, at best, or a fool, at worst. At a minimum, this excuse maker is telling the host that he didn't care enough about the invitation even to plan ahead for it. Worse, he is saying he has no respect for anyone or anything, especially not for himself. If he truly did buy five yoke of untested oxen he is either rich enough or stupid enough to have no self-respect.

I just got married

If there is one of these excuses that has any validity, it might be this one. Perhaps he is saying that he is willingly on his way to being a henpecked husband; his new wife won't let him come. Perhaps he is just reinterpreting the law; because a newly-married man was exempt from military service or business for a year (Deut 24:5), he thought that included social engagements. Marriage could, in theory, exempt him from attendance at the host's party.

Regardless of how valid his reasoning might be, he had made one serious mistake. He had forgotten to decline the invitation. It is hardly likely that his wedding was a spur-of-the-moment affair. It could have occurred up to a year previous to this banquet, or even within a few weeks. Either way, he likely knew he was getting married, or was already married, at the time his host invited him. His failure to decline disrespected his friend.

The common thread with all three of these men is that they showed no respect for their potential host. That is really the nature of an excuse, a lack of respect. Asking to be excused is not the same as making an excuse. If you receive an invitation and immediately reply that you cannot come, there is no law that says you have to explain yourself. You may have a valid reason, or you just may not want to go. Just say no, but do it right away. That shows consideration. To wait to respond until the host has already prepared for you is rude. Advance notice of not coming at least gives the host a chance to adjust his plans, and his monetary outlay.

None shall taste

The host in the parable makes sure that every seat at the table is filled. He wants to be sure that none of the excuse makers can change his mind and show up anyway. If they do, there won't be a place for them. Even worse, their place will be filled by one of lower social class. This, after all, was the point of the parable. Social status is meaningless in the kingdom of God. If anything, those of a higher social status before men may be the least likely to enter the kingdom.

Excuses hold no weight with God. No matter how good the excuse seems to be, God sees through it. Reasons are more to be excused than excuses are. God doesn't

want excuse-makers; he wants people that will respect him, and obey him.

What's your excuse?

The excuses are not the point of the parable, but they do raise a valid question. Do we try to make excuses to God? Or are our excuses really for us rather than for God? Instead of just saying no to Him, do we try to justify ourselves.

There are hypocrites in the church. One member hasn't apologized for a slight she may not even be aware of. My care is on its last legs. My wife/husband won't let me. My parents don't want me to go to church, and I am supposed to obey my parents, right? I can't teach because I am "slow of speech and slow of tongue." I don't know enough. I might lose my job or my friends.

Anyone who has been in charge of any work in the church has probably heard almost every one of those.

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right away. That shows
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Anyone who has tried to teach the lost has probably heard the rest of them. People are always ready with an excuse. What they/we don't always realize is that it is a dangerous thing to try to make excuses to the one who sees the heart of man. It would seem that God would rather hear an honest "I don't want to" than any of the above excuses. The atheist's "I don't believe there is a God" is more honest than an excuse that says, "I say I believe in God, but I don't think he has enough power to recognize my excuse for what it is."

While the excuses themselves may not be the point of the parable, it does have a point, and it relates to the excuses. When God hears excuses, especially the especially lame ones, God tells his servants to go out and find those who won't make excuses. Bring in the poor and needy, the ones who recognize their sins and the need for a savior. Bring in those who have nothing "better" to do. Fill the church with those who need and want to be there, so that those who want to make excuses have no room.

The next time someone asks, "What's your excuse," why not answer, "I don't need one." Have a little respect, both to yourself and God.

WESLEY, MARTIN, AND JOHN

Martin M’Rose was a troublemaker and possibly a cattle rustler who spent some time in Carlsbad, New Mexico. John Wesley Hardin was possibly the most infamous, and conscienceless, gunfighter in Texas or the world. John Selman was the head of a notorious gang known for rape and murder, who later became Constable of El Paso, Texas. While M’Rose was hiding from a rustling charge in Mexico, Wes Hardin was having an affair with Martin’s wife, Beulah. Hardin, by this time a lawyer in El Paso, convinced M’Rose to come back to the Texas side. M’Rose was then ambushed and killed, and Wes ended up with his wife. Two months later, Selman shot (murdered?) Hardin by shooting him in the back of the head during a dice game. (Selman was not convicted of murder; a case of the victim being worse than the killer.) Less than seven months later Selman was shot by Marshall George Scarborough, who really has nothing to do with the point I am going to make, since he died years later in Deming, New Mexico.

Three criminals (two of which died while on the side of the law), all died by gunshots. Three criminals all died in El Paso within a period of nine months. Three criminals all buried near each other in Concordia Cemetery in El Paso (M’Rose and Hardin only three graves apart).

What does all this have to do with the Bible? One is tempted to say that it shows that even the worst sinners could change their ways. That is probably not true of Martin M’Rose. But Wes Hardin became a lawyer and John Selman became a Constable. One might be tempted to say that they had changed, and yet Hardin may have been the ultimate cause of M’Rose’s death because of his carryings on with Beula M’Rose. John Selman may have

been a lawman, but he was most certainly guilty of murdering Wes Hardin. So neither of them actually changed. What then is the lesson?

The lesson, if there is one, can be found in Concordia Cemetery. Besides being the burial place of these three notorious men, Concordia was also for a short while the resting place of Mexican President Victoriano Huerta. It is the final resting place of some of the founders of the city of El Paso. It is also the site of a Buffalo Soldiers monument. Even though it was divided into black, oriental, and Anglo sections, Concordia shows no partiality as to who is buried there. Famous and infamous, remembered and forgotten, land owners and landless; a cemetery makes no distinctions.

But then, Solomon said the same thing centuries ago. After careful consideration, he concluded:

As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. (Eccl 2:14-16)

One psalmist said much the same. “Wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others.” (Ps 49:10) His (or her) conclusion, though, was that “God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave.”

Yes, Martin M’Rose and Wes Hardin met the same fate. But they are buried with pillars of society. The grave sees no difference. But God sees beyond the grave. It is not the end, but the beginning.

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