

HIDING IN THE STUFF
(1 Samuel 10:22)
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Charles McKinley certainly surprised the delivery man. In September 2003 he shipped himself from New York City to Dallas in a wooden crate. When the crate was delivered to his parents' home, he started breaking out of the box. The crate had been carried by truck, plane and delivery van. McKinley told officials that he was simply homesick and thought it would be cheaper to ship himself than to buy a ticket. He went across the country hiding in the stuff. He was fined \$1,500 and sentenced to 120 days of house arrest. At the cost of that fine, he could have bought himself four roundtrips to see his parents. It does not pay to hide in the stuff.

Hiding in the stuff has become a hotbed of discussion among world security analysts. Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Italian authorities found a suspected **Al Qaeda** operative inside a shipping container bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. The container originated in Port Said, Egypt, and inside the container were airport maps and a phony airplane mechanic's certificate. Much more recently, two homicide bombers entered the port of Ashdod, Israel, by hiding inside a cargo container. They ended up killing dozens of people. Hiding in the stuff can be of threat to other people as well as to you.

Even more bizarre than hiding in the stuff is the story of a 14-year-old homeless boy who stowed away in the landing gear of a passenger jet and survived a 430-mile flight across southwest China in November 2004. But a friend riding with him fell from the plane and died during the hour-long flight, which reached an altitude of about 23,000 feet. Hiding while trying to get somewhere can indeed be dangerous and bizarre.

Yet in some ways, the most striking story of hiding in the stuff, stowing away in order not to be discovered, hiding oneself so that destiny can be avoided, belongs to the first king of Israel, the tall and handsome Saul. More bizarre than shipping himself in a crate or hiding in the landing gear, the story of Saul presents the astonishing saga of a man who tried to hide from his own destiny in the luggage stored at a national convention meeting at Gilgal.

Saul, the son of Kish, presents a timeless picture of greatness diminished by petty pursuits, detours, vendettas and sidetracks. He squandered great opportunity at the feet of unworthy triviality.

One moment in his life captures and crystallizes the wasting of his great potential. At the very time Samuel wished to present Saul as the King, he is “hiding among the supplies” (HCSB). Some translate it “baggage,” some “equipment.” The King James just says: “... among the stuff.” The tallest, most handsome and most favored man of his age crouches down in the midst of the luggage at the moment Samuel wishes to present him as King. It is the epitome of his tragic life.

Saul appears like a comet against the black backdrop of the days of the Judges and Samuel. He is introduced in chapter 9. “There was no one more impressive among the Israelites than he. He stood a head taller than anyone else” (9:2). One immediately anticipates the career of a great king. Yet we are not prepared for what is next. This man of great promise is sent looking for donkeys. The man who would be king first appears on a mammoth donkey hunt. “One day the donkeys of Saul’s father Kish wandered off. Kish said to his son Saul, ‘Take one of the attendants with you and go look for the donkeys’” (9:3).

God intervenes so that Saul does not trade his destiny for donkeys. The silver haired Samuel has heard from the Lord, and he anoints the astonished donkey searcher to be the first king of Israel. “Samuel took the flask of oil, poured it out on Saul’s head and kissed him, and said, ‘Hasn’t the Lord anointed you ruler over His inheritance?’” (10:1). God even intervenes to give Saul a new heart. Further, Samuel predicts three most unlikely events that unfold like clockwork before Saul’s very eyes (10:2-13). “When Saul turned around to leave Samuel, God changed his heart, and all the signs came about that day” (10:9).

In spite of all of God's provision and preparation, Saul hides from his own destiny. There is hardly a more pathetic picture in the Old Testament. Unthinkable, yet unforgettable once imagined. The tallest man in the nation hunkered down among the luggage of the national meeting called by Samuel.

Yet Saul's tragic story has often been repeated in the life of many a minister, church and even denomination. Great opportunity squandered on trivial pursuits, enormous talents dwarfed by ridiculous detours and wasted energy on tertiary crusades crushes many ministers and some denominations.

The question I raise for us in this hour for your ministry and for our denomination is simple, singular, startling and suggestive: are we hiding in our own stuff?

I. WE MAY HIDE IN THE STUFF IN SPITE OF OUR GREAT POTENTIAL

The description of Saul presents a man favored both externally and inherently (9:1-2).

Externally in those matters which God alone gives us. His family was wealthy and powerful. He came from the favorite of the tribes, Benjamin. His parentage and his heritage gave him every advantage.

But added to those extrinsic qualities were those **inherent qualities** in Saul himself. He was the tallest of the tall in a culture of short people. He was the most handsome of the handsome in a rugged nomadic culture where visual appeal was rare. God endowed him with qualities that Saul did not initiate and could not control. We have seen the same scenario played out in our time.

You've heard of Billy Graham. But what about Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford? Have you ever heard of them?

Billy Graham wasn't the only young preacher packing auditoriums in 1945. Chuck Templeton and Bron Clifford were accomplishing the same thing – and more. All three young men were in their mid-twenties. One seminary president, after hearing Chuck Templeton preach one evening to an audience of thousands, called him "the most gifted and talented young man in America today for preaching."

Templeton and Graham were friends. Both ministered with Youth for Christ. Both were extraordinary preachers. Yet in those early years, most observers would probably have identified Templeton as the brightest preaching prospect. As a matter of fact, in 1946, the National Association of Evangelicals published an article on men who were "best used of God" in that organization's five-year existence. The article highlighted the ministry of Chuck Templeton. Billy Graham was never mentioned.

Bron Clifford was yet another gifted, twenty-five-year-old fireball. In 1945, many believed Clifford the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. In that same year, Clifford preached to an auditorium of thousands in Miami, Florida. People lined up ten and twelve deep outside the auditorium trying to get in.

Graham, Templeton, and Clifford.

In 1945, all three came shooting out of the starting blocks like rockets. You've heard of Billy Graham. So how come you may never have heard of Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford?

Just five years later, Templeton left the ministry to pursue a career as a radio and television commentator and newspaper columnist. Templeton had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. By 1950, he no longer believed in the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ.

What about Clifford? By 1954, Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health, and then . . . his life. Alcohol and financial irresponsibility had done him in. He wound up leaving his wife and their two Down's syndrome children. At just thirty-five years of age, this once great preacher died from cirrhosis of the liver in a run-down motel on the edge of Amarillo. His last job was selling used cars in the panhandle of Texas.

In 1945, three men with extraordinary gifts were preaching the gospel to multiplied thousands across this nation. Within ten years, only one of them was still on track for Christ.

Two of these men wound up like Saul. In spite of great potential they were hiding in the stuff of their own lives. One hid in the stuff of liberal neo-orthodox theology and the other hid in the bottle. Hiding in the stuff, chasing donkeys instead of destiny.

Last year I spoke of the fact that for years our denomination has witnessed declining baptisms. While several years of increased baptisms served to raise the trend line, the trend from 1950-2004 continues to be plateaued. The trend line for that period is basically flat, projecting an annual increase of only 45 baptisms. While membership in our churches has increased by nine million, our growth in baptisms over the last 55 years has been only 45 baptisms per year, about one for every 1,000 churches!

In spite of the struggle for 25 years to recover biblical faithfulness we are witnessing a stagnation in evangelism. We are a denomination hiding in the stuff. We are running endlessly to and fro doing good things. Hiding in the busyness of our lives we have lost our passion for the lost. In spite of our great potential we seem to be hiding in the stuff.

II. WE MAY HIDE IN THE STUFF OF TRIVIAL PURSUITS

Nothing really prepares us for the jarring contrast of 1 Sam.9:3. We move from destiny to donkeys. After the description of Saul's heritage and height, one would expect the story of some great, commanding odyssey of faith. Instead, this man of greatest promise trades destiny for

donkeys. His father imposes on him a ridiculous task, searching for lost donkeys. The man who would rule the nation is looking for donkeys.

There is something ridiculous about the power, charisma and charm of Saul being consumed in a search for the most stubborn of brute beasts. A man who had a date with destiny was detoured looking for displaced donkeys.

This propensity to hide among trivialities continued to be a pattern in Saul's life. In 1 Sam. 24:14, after David had spared Saul's life, he confronted Saul with this stinging accusation: "Who has the king of Israel come after? What are you chasing after? A dead dog? A flea?"

Saul hated David and determined to catch and kill him. Think of it. The king was a man above men, kingly in appearance, friends with Samuel the great prophet. He was adorned with all the garments of royalty. He had a crown, a throne and a scepter. He had an army at his command. And what was he doing? Chasing dead dogs and fleas!

Can you imagine anything more tragic? A king prostituting great authority to accomplish selfish and ungodly ends, wasting vast energies on cheap trivialities, dishonoring himself with cheap littleness.

Saul is a type of any and all who use their endowments, energies, educational advantage, spiritual privileges and their very being in chasing after things that matter little at all! He exchanged spiritual principles for unworthy expediencies, high ideals for cheap compromise. He was a slave to small ambitions, little anxieties and midget ideas. He is a type of all who are daily missing the central purposes of life because they are victims of tiny trivialities.

Stories of people doing absurd things leading nowhere are commonplace in popular periodicals. John Bain created a 3,120- pound ball of rubber bands, started while goofing off at work. 18-year-old Scott Bartlett created a monster ball of masking tape, weighing in at 420 pounds.

For many years, the world's largest twine ball has resided in Darwin, Minnesota. It weighs 17,400 pounds, is twelve feet in diameter, and was the creation of Francis A. Johnson. He started wrapping it in March of 1950 -- four hours a day, every day. Francis lifted it with a crane to continue proper wrapping. For 39 years, this magnificent sphere evolved at Johnson's farm, and eventually moved to a circular open air shed on his front lawn.

Francis died in 1989; the city moved the ball into a special city lot across from the park. The new gazebo that shelters it allows viewing from all sides through Plexiglas panels. The town's "Twine Ball Days" festival is the second Saturday in August.

We chuckle at the absurdity of these pointless pursuits. Yet behind these is the pathetic tragedy of wasting life, time, attention, energy and money on a pointless pursuit of the absurd. It is another form of chasing donkeys rather than destiny.

I wonder if many of us present here today are doing little more than ministerial twine-ball collecting, chasing dead dogs and fleas? Are we slaves to the urgent, being too busy to give attention to that which is really important?

I want to pose the question: Are we going to become a denomination that chases donkeys, dead-dogs and fleas? Are we going to become a twine-ball-winding denomination? Do not consider it impossible. Those who carried out the dead ecclesiastical corpses of once great denominations are waiting to carry us out as well if we trade our destiny for donkey searches. Our passion for souls has cooled and slipped away from us. We often major on trivialities and get lost in endless pursuit while we neglect the main task God has assigned to us.

III. WE MAY HIDE IN THE STUFF ALTHOUGH GOD BLESSES US AND ENDOWS US WITH EVIDENCE OF HIS PRESENCE AND POWER.

Did any man of God ever have a more singular demonstration of God's favor, power and endowment than Saul? Saul received one sign after another indicating God's personal favor and

choice of Saul (10:2-7). Saul knew the anointing of God (10:1). Saul received a new heart (10:9). Like an avalanche of God's blessings, Saul encountered wave after wave of divine favor. Yet at the critical moment, Saul still hid among the stuff.

What of us? God has acted in the past in our lives in such ways that we knew it was GOD, and could not have been accident, random chance or impersonal fate. Do you ever think of those moments? Do you ever recall the interventions of God in your life, that demonstrates GOD is GOD and He is involved in your life? And yet do you still hide in the stuff?

When I consider the history of our beloved denomination, I tremble at the thought of what God did with a group of largely rural, mostly poor, on the average uneducated and in the main people of no wealth, power or influence. That little group that met in 1845 to form the Southern Baptist Convention did not even act from the highest of motives in relation to the great issue of slavery. They did not acknowledge the sin of judging an entire race on the color of their skin. Yet in spite of poverty, ignorance, prejudice, rural conditions and lack of education, GOD for His own purposes put His hand on our denomination.

We dare not be so arrogant as to think He did so because we were better, brighter, less prejudiced, more educated or sharper than other denominations. That simply is not the case. GOD passed by the great magisterial churches of this land and put His mighty hand on a group of people considered by the elitists to be underclass, backward, ignorant and prejudiced. God took that group of people huddled around little churches in the South and on the frontier and elevated them into the greatest Evangelical denomination in the strongest country in the world.

God has blessed us beyond any prediction, explanation or expectation. Yet, after 160 years of His singular blessing, are we still hiding in the stuff? When God calls us, the answer is never TRUE or FALSE, but rather YES or NO. We are not here to take a test about our heritage, and answer whether it is True or False that God has blessed us. We are rather here to answer YES or NO to the call of God to our future, and not to hide in the stuff.

IV. AT THE END OF THE DAY WE MAY STILL HIDE IN THE STUFF.

After all of this, we find Saul, this man of great promise, hiding in the stuff. One of the most ridiculous pictures in all world literature is this tall, impressive, now anointed, chosen man crouched down in the baggage of the national convocation where he was to be presented as King. What a pitiful picture. At the moment of his destiny, he is ducking destiny by hiding among people's luggage.

This is a tragedy of epochal proportions. But there could be a greater tragedy, and that would be for those of us who are so blessed to hide in our own personal and denominational stuff. We have everything to be proud about in our Southern Baptist Convention. We have seen a remarkable return to the basic convictions of our faith. We have seen a spiritual renewal and growing enrollments in our seminaries. The sharpest and brightest young theologians and professors now serve in our six seminaries. We have seen significant growth in mission awareness and accomplishment in our mission boards. Our numbers of missionaries have swelled to all time highs. We have become a respected and responsible voice on the national scene regarding our culture and public policy. We have become the largest provider of Christian resources in the world. We have the finest financial provision for our future of any denomination in history. We have so much to be proud of today. It would be a tragedy beyond description if after all of this we find ourselves hiding among the stuff!

1. We cannot hide in the stuff of the past. Some of us may wish to turn back to old days and old ways, before worship wars, theological wars, cultural wars and the challenges of the post-modern world. We cannot hide in the stuff of the past 25 years of convention renewal. The battles and victories were significant, but it is now time for us to build on what has been accomplished. The modern world is gone. We have no choice in that. It is gone! We now minister in all of the anti-authority revolution of the post modern world, facing the greatest challenges our faith has ever faced. We cannot hide in the stuff of the past.

2. We cannot hide in the stuff of personal, church and convention power struggles and the resultant tension, bitterness and resentment that these engender. Life, ministry, friends and even denominations may wound us, forget us or betray us. We must not ever let ourselves hide in the stuff of bitterness, resentment and cynicism. It will be a canker in our souls and cause us to fail to be what God put us here to be. It is time for us to move past these struggles to truly engage our culture with the Gospel. That is our destiny!
3. We cannot hide in the stuff of church chaos and divisions. While the world around us slides toward hell our churches are often battlegrounds instead of lighthouses. Refusing to abide by clear biblical principles of reconciliation and restoration, many churches are torn to shreds by carnal members and arrogant leaders. We cannot hide in that stuff any longer!
4. We cannot hide in the stuff of prayerlessness. Our greatest need as a people is to prostrate ourselves before God in prayer. Our nation today stands under the judgment of God. When will we awake to that reality and seek His face? We are hiding today in the stuff of prayerlessness.

There came a moment when Saul had to stand. When he stood, he stood out among the stuff. It is thus time for us to stand tall above the stuff that life, ministry and circumstances have accumulated around us. This is our time!

On April 23, 1910, the 26th President of the United States of America, Theodore Roosevelt, stood in the Sorbonne in Paris to delivery an unforgettable speech. He spoke these immortal words:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows

great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

When Theodore Roosevelt spoke those words, our nation had not faced any of the challenges of the 20th century: the two Wars, the Depression and the threats of our own day. It is a clarion call not to hide in the stuff. Listen to that ringing phrase, “If he fails, at least fails while daring greatly....”

Could we not at this high hour resolve on our knees and faces before God that we will not hide in the stuff? We will not belong to those timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat because they hide in the stuff.

Our destiny is before us! Southern Baptists have been crafted by God to be the leader in evangelism and missions, in confronting our culture with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has positioned us to call this nation to prayer and awakening. We must not hide in the stuff of our own destiny.

Winston Churchill once said, “To every man there comes in his lifetime that special moment when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder to do a special thing unique to him and fitted to his talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared or unqualified for the work which would be his finest hour.” God has tapped Southern Baptists on the shoulder. This is that special moment. That unique thing for which God has molded us is before us. We must grasp this moment that God has uniquely placed before us as Southern Baptists.

One has gone before us Who could have hid in the carpenter's shop of Nazareth, in the comparative comfort of glorious days in Galilee or could have retired to be a contemplative rabbi outside of the conflict. He could have refused the bitter cup before Him. But He must go to Jerusalem. He must be condemned. He must be tortured and He must die. He could not hide in the stuff. And because He did not hide, God has given Him a Name above every Name. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. We must not, we will not waste our destiny chasing donkeys, dead dogs or fleas! We will not just fish from the bank. We will launch out into the deep. Let us rise and follow Him. Rise up Southern Baptists as we follow His story to its glorious conclusion!