At a young age, my father taught my sister and I to play chess. He taught us the different movements of the king, queen, bishops, knights, rooks and the pawns along with some basic strategy. We would play for hours trying to outmaneuver each other. As with most chess players, I valued the powerful pieces more highly than the weaker pieces. My rooks were protected. And I did everything I could not to lose the most versatile and powerful piece on the board – the queen. But the pawns, I often undervalued seeing them as expendable.

A master chess player, however, sees all of his pieces as important and has a strategic purpose for every movement. He moves each piece with deliberate intent and purpose, guided by wisdom – including every pawn.

As I’ve meditated on 1 Samuel 16, the game of chess kept coming to mind in terms of how God works in the world and our lives. One of the things that we learn from the Scripture is that despite the chaos and disorder we see in the world because of sin, God is a master chess player who moves every piece in history with deliberate intent and purpose so as to overturn evil.

In 1 Samuel 16, the Lord moves a very important piece onto the board of redemptive history, the only man in the Bible named David. His name is mentioned more than a thousand times in the Scripture, exceeding that of both Moses and Abraham. In terms of chapters, more chapters are devoted to narrating David’s life than anyone else in the Old Testament except Moses. Why? Because, he will play a strategic part on the chessboard of history.

One of the great unfolding themes in the Bible, that meanders back to Genesis 3, is the promise of a distant offspring of Eve, a seed, who would overturn the evil one. Imbedded into the Bible’s first curse, the Lord said to the devil, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen3:15). Thus, in the midst of the moral and spiritual collapse of humanity, a gleam of hope rested on the One who would bruise (or crush) the head of the serpent. The Old Testament is careful to trace this line of offspring through the lives of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons (who became the twelve tribes of Israel). The line would be traced through David, winding its way through the generations to the son of David, named Jesus. The book of Revelation refers to Jesus as, “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,” who has “conquered” (Rev 5:5). In effect, in chapter 16 of Samuel, the Lord moves onto the chessboard of history the ancestor of the Messiah.

But the story reveals to us that unlike the way we humans play chess, God moves very differently. The story of 1 Samuel 16 can be divided into two parts: God’s choosing (1 Sam 16:1-13), and God’s moving (1 Sam 16:14-23).

**Part One: God Choosing his Man:**

1 The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have
provided for myself a king among his sons.” 2 And Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ 3 And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.” 4 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?” 5 And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him.” 7 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 sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” (1 Sam 16:1-7)

In short, the prophet Samuel is directed to anoint a new king. But the Lord is intentionally ambiguous by not naming who the person will be, which of Jesse’s sons. So a process of selection is put play. The firstborn passes by, Eliab, who from what Samuel says to himself, surely looks like a kingly person. The sense is that Eliab was physically impressive, tall, like Saul was. If Eliab was a chess piece, he would be one of the more impressive pieces. But he’s not God’s choice for this key moment in history.

In effect, Samuel makes the same mistake that we often do. We often judge the usefulness or value of someone based upon how charismatic they are, educated they are, talented they are, socially confident they are, or eloquent they are. We’ve been trained by our world to make choices based upon what we see with our physical eyes. God, however, in a mild rebuke, tells the prophet that he looks on something different, the heart – the inner being of the man.

So the other sons of Jesse pass before Samuel. The Lord did not choose any of them. So the prophet said to Jesse:

“The LORD has not chosen these.” 11 Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” 12 And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.” 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.” (1 Sam 16:11-13)

Contrary to human expectations and convention, the LORD chooses the youngest, and perhaps the runt of the litter. The text does tell us that David is ruddy (red) in color, with beautiful eyes and a handsome look. But the absence of any mention of size and stature gives the impression that he wasn’t physically impressive. From comments made by both Saul and Goliath later, it would seem that he was less than the model champion.

Let me submit to you that from all outward appearances, David looked more like a pawn than a king. But in this pawn was the raging heart of a man fully surrendered to the will of the Chess Master, as we will see in the weeks ahead. This tells us something about how God plays chess in history AND how he strategically uses us.

In the words of Paul, “27…God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 [and here’s why] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:28-29). The Lord gravitates to the use of pawns, surrendered in trust to his hand, to conquer.
This, of course, has Jesus written all over it. Jesus was born in a lowly feeding trough, to a lowly peasant family, grew up in a no-name town named Nazareth, had no formal rabbinical training, yet fully yielded to his Father’s will. And like a true Pawn, was willing to be sacrificed on the chessboard of history. The devil moved his bishops, knights and rooks into position to kill – Pilate, Caiphus, and King Herod. The great irony, of course, is that when they did kill the pawn, the game was over. In his death, the devil was forced into checkmate. And the world would never be the same after.

That has a significant lesson for us. We tend to believe the lie that unless we are somehow extraordinary, that God can’t really use us. The opposite, however, is the truth. The Lord works his redemption through lowly pawns, fully surrendered to the Chessmaster’s loving and sovereign hand. The truth is that the significance of our lives is not based upon how great we are or how much we have to offer. The significance of our lives rests on the simple fact that we yield our lives in trust to the hand of the one who loves us most. And what He chooses to do with our lives on the board of history – however public or private, great or small – is his to command. God simply calls us, you and me, to release ourselves in trust to his hand – to move as he pleases. God wins with pawns who are surrendered in trust to him.

Part Two: God Moving His Man:

But that’s not the end of the story of the Chessmaster. Not only does God choose, but he also moves his man. Let me read the rest of the chapter.

14 Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him. 15 And Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. 16 Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” 17 So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” 18 One of the young men answered, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him.” 19 Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” 20 And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. 21 And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. 22 And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” 23 And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (1 Sam 16:14-23)

Notice that this section begins and ends with the harmful spirit tormenting Saul. It frames the story, which means that the solution to his spirit-problem is the focus. Now I have to say that one of the most troubling things about the section is the mention of “a harmful spirit from the Lord.” How could a harmful (or evil spirit in KJV and NIV) spirit come from the Lord? I’m going to attempt to answer that question in a future message. But not this morning.

Rather, what should be noted is how the Chessmaster uses the harmful spirit. The Scripture is insistent that evil inevitably plays right into the plan of God. The Lord outwits it and bends it toward his will. Notice that as a result of this tormenting spirit, Saul’s counselors tell him to seek out a talented musician so that the therapeutic qualities of music might be used to ease the torment and send the evil spirit away. It just so happens that one of Saul’s staff knows a young talented musician named (strangely enough) David. Accidental? Not a chance. The text
tells us that David was sought out and brought into Saul’s presence. Saul loved him greatly (initially at least) and his armor bearer.

Do you see what has happened? First, the Lord chose David and now he’s moving him into position. He’s moving him toward kingship in to the court of king Saul. But notice that it’s the Lord who’s doing it providentially. That’s one of the remarkable things about David’s life. He never grasps at kingship. He always waits for the Lord to move him there, like a good pawn waiting for the hand of God to move. In other words, he waits for the Lord to open the doors in his life. The new king is now playing music and bearing the weapons for the old king.

That too, is instructive for us. It teaches us that we don’t have to push our way into the will of God in our lives. If we’re trusting him and being faithful wherever we are, then his hand will move us when and if it’s time. David was a shepherd. And after he was anointed as king, he didn’t have anything to do. So what did he return to? Shepherding (v. 19)! Then the door opened to play his lyre, then to carry weapons for the king. David simply did what the Lord gave him to do and left the future up to the Lord.

The same holds true for us. The Lord has placed you where you are. And unless “where you are” is in sin, be faithful there. Surrender yourself to his will. We were talking about this in a theology group this past week. It’s easy to read stories about people who have sold everything and moved to other countries to start orphanages, and think to yourself, “Wow…that’s really what God wants” and then make yourself feel guilty that you’re not doing the same. As good and as inspiring as those stories might be, they were never meant to devalue or discourage us from what God has given us to do now, where he has us now.

I spoke to a retired public school teacher some time ago – taught for nearly four decades. And the man shared with me that when he was younger, he really wanted to be a missionary to China. He had regrets that he didn’t go. But when I considered all of the students he impacted – many of them writing to him decades later because of how he cared for them – the parents, faculty, it was clear to me that God had him right where he wanted him. In addition, because he stayed here in the US, he has personally led nearly all of his neighbors to Christ. This is a fact. We have to trust the Chessmaster. Where you are is not an accident, but strategic. God simply calls you to be the pawn – surrendered in trust to the loving hand of God.

God places his chess pieces in classrooms, in coffee shops, in management positions, in squad cars, dealerships, grocery stores, neighborhoods…you name it. The Lord has you where you are for a reason. Just be faithful and serve him there. Let his hand move you and use you, remembering that the Lord gravitates to the pawns, not the pieces of power.

Right now, the Lord is moving his pieces on the board of history. And it’s our time. The story of redemption continues in our lives and is every bit as important as the parts recorded in the Bible. All we need to do is be surrendered in faith to him, and serve him faithfully where we have already been placed-trusting that God will move us when the time comes. We spend way too much time worrying about the future, and not enough time living in the present, where our Sovereign King has already placed us.