

“The Ways of God’s Conquering King”
2 Samuel 8
September 20, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
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We return again this evening to the Book of Samuel.

David has been established as the king of all Israel. He is settled into Jerusalem. And then, in chapter seven, God makes a covenant with David, promising that a descendant of David will sit on the throne forever.

We of course know that Jesus is that descendant, and that he sits on the throne now, which is why, when David lives up to his kingly calling rightly, he gives us a picture – a foreshadowing – of Christ.

And so, with that in mind, we come to Second Samuel chapter eight.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

^{8:1} After this David defeated the Philistines and subdued them, and David took Metheg-ammah out of the hand of the Philistines.

² And he defeated Moab and he measured them with a line, making them lie down on the ground. Two lines he measured to be put to death, and one full line to be spared. And the Moabites became servants to David and brought tribute.

³ David also defeated Hadadezer the son of Rehob, king of Zobah, as he went to restore his power at the river Euphrates. ⁴ And David took from him 1,700 horsemen, and 20,000 foot soldiers. And David hamstrung all the chariot horses but left enough for 100 chariots. ⁵ And when the Syrians of Damascus came to help Hadadezer king of Zobah, David struck down 22,000 men of the Syrians. ⁶ Then David put garrisons in Aram of Damascus, and the Syrians became servants to David and brought tribute. And the LORD [Yahweh] gave victory to David wherever he went. ⁷ And David took the shields of gold that were carried by the servants of Hadadezer and brought them to Jerusalem. ⁸ And from Betah and from Berothai, cities of Hadadezer, King David took very much bronze.

⁹ When Toi king of Hamath heard that David had defeated the whole army of Hadadezer, ¹⁰ Toi sent his son Joram to King David, to ask about his health and to bless him because he had fought against Hadadezer and defeated him, for Hadadezer had often been at war with Toi. And Joram brought with him articles of silver, of gold, and of bronze. ¹¹ These also King David dedicated to Yahweh, together with the silver and gold that he dedicated from all the nations he subdued, ¹² from Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, Amalek, and from the spoil of Hadadezer the son of Rehob, king of Zobah.

¹³ And David made a name for himself when he returned from striking down 18,000 Edomites in the Valley of Salt. ¹⁴ Then he put garrisons in Edom; throughout all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became David's servants. And Yahweh gave victory to David wherever he went.

¹⁵ So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity to all his people. ¹⁶ Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder, ¹⁷ and Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was secretary, ¹⁸ and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and David's sons were priests.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let's pray ...

Lord, our souls long for your salvation,
and so we hope in your word.
We long for your promise,
and we long for your comfort.
Whatever trials and hardships we face,
we do not forget you, but we look for your deliverance.
As we come now to your word,
We ask that in your steadfast love you would give us life.
Strengthen and guide us
so that we can keep the testimonies that have come to us from your lips.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Psalm 119:81-84, 88]

INTRODUCTION:

As we have seen throughout the Book of Samuel, the Bible is often complex in how it instructs us through the stories it tells.

Sometimes it holds out for us directly described truths about God – what he does and what he is like.

Other times it holds out examples of faithfulness, whom we are called to emulate.

Other times it holds out examples of unfaithfulness, whose choices we are warned about.

Other times it holds out people who serve as types of Christ – who show us what he is like by their actions.

Still other times it does all four at once, showing God's faithfulness in his actions in the world, along with negative examples to avoid, and positive examples that both display truths about Christ and provide a model for us to imitate in their faithfulness.

David has been anointed king, and he has been chosen by God to be the forefather of the Eternal King – the Messiah, who will sit on the throne forever.

David will be faithful to that call in some ways, and unfaithful in other ways.

Our chapter tonight primarily highlights his faithfulness, and God's work through him, and thus gives us a picture of our Eternal King – of Christ, the Lord ... along with an exhortation – a pattern of life that we are called to imitate.

What this chapter lays out for us are the ways of God's conquering king.

And there are five “ways” of God’s conquering king in this chapter that I especially want to highlight:

- God’s conquering king sees the whole battlefield
- God’s king carries out God’s timing
- God’s king shows both justice and mercy to his enemies
- God’s king is anchored in God’s promises, and
- God’s king calls us to trust and serve him.

Those are the five things we’ll consider tonight.

THE KING SEES THE WHOLE BATTLEFIELD:

So first, God’s conquering king sees the whole battlefield.

That is stressed here with David, as the chapter is laid out geographically. In verse one it speaks of David’s war with the Philistines, who were to the west. In verse two it describes David’s war with Moab, who was to the east. In verses three through eight it tells us about David’s war with Hadadezer, who was to the north. And in verses thirteen and fourteen it tells us of David’s war with the Edomites who were to the south. [Roberts; Leithart, 225]

North, south, east, and west – David faced battlefields on every side, and he engaged them properly as battlefields. And that’s important to note. Because it can be easy to see some battlefields while missing others.

We, as the readers could be tempted to do that as we come to this chapter. After all, it’s the Philistines we have heard about again and again throughout Samuel. We haven’t thought much about the Moabites, the Edomites, or the forces of Hadadezar. But just because we haven’t been thinking about them doesn’t mean that they’re not there.

In a similar way, David could have been tempted to overlook some of these threats as well. David had Moabite ancestors, as we have been remembering in our morning sermon series in the Book of Ruth – Ruth, a Moabitess, was David’s great-grandmother. But David’s connections to Moab were not just in the distant past – in First Samuel 22 we were told that when David was threatened by Saul, he found a refuge for his parents among the Moabites – with the king of Moab himself. David had all sorts of reasons to overlook the threat of the Moabites.

But David is God’s king. And so David must see the entire battlefield: the threats not just from the West, but also from the East, and even from the North and the South.

And as he does this, he shows us the approach of Christ our Lord – both in this world and in each of our hearts.

Jesus sees all the things that threaten his kingdom, and all the things that threaten our faith in our hearts. And like David, he is at war with all of them. He does not overlook any of them.

Jesus is a King who sees the whole battlefield.

The question is: What about us?

It can be very easy for us to see one battlefield while missing another. It can be very easy for us to see clearly the threat of the Philistines to our west, while making peace with the Moabites to our east, and completely forgetting about Hadadezer and Edom to our north and south.

Let me start with one very specific contemporary example, and then expand it to a few others.

The last few months Christians have been struggling, and wrestling, and disagreeing about how best to respond to government regulations concerning the coronavirus pandemic. We've talked about that.

And as I've said, these are complex issues that call for biblical wisdom, and sincere Christians can disagree on how best to navigate them. We are called to love one another even as we disagree on the specifics of how to apply God's word and biblical wisdom to each situation.

That is all true. And I don't want to re-hash that, or to get into the details of who might be right and who might be wrong in each element of those discussions.

What I want to draw out tonight is that each and every one of us is also tempted to overlook aspects of the spiritual battle for our hearts that is at work in that process.

Let me mention just two.

In Acts chapter five, Peter is dragged before the Jerusalem council and the high priest. And the high priest says to him: "We strictly charged you not to teach in [Jesus's] name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

And Peter's response to him is: "We must obey God rather than men."

This is not only wise guidance for us, but Peter is alerting us to a spiritual battle: the temptation to obey man rather than God, out of cowardice.

That same Apostle Peter, in chapter two of his first epistle exhorted his readers, saying: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" – and then he went on to list the pagan rulers who were included among those whom the Christians were to submit to.

Peter, again, is not only providing wise guidance for us, but he is alerting us to another spiritual battle: the temptation to disobey the authorities God has put in place, out of obstinacy and an unsubmitive spirit.

As we navigate the current situation, these are just two of several spiritual battles that all of us face. But our temptation is so often to see one and be blind to the other – it is to see the Philistines and overlook the Moabites.

And so some of us can be so focused on submission and being civil, that we fail to seriously consider even the question of where that line is that, if we were to cross it, we would be guilty of obeying men rather than obeying God.

And others of us can be so focused on not obeying man rather than God, that we can fail to seriously consider the situations in which we are called to submit to an authority we disagree with. After all, submission is not only obeying when we agree – that’s just agreement. Submission is obeying when we disagree. That’s what makes it submission.

The forces of Satan are delighted when they can get a Christian to obey men rather than God, out of cowardice. The forces of Satan are also – and I think equally – delighted when they can get a Christian to rebel against authorities that God has put in place, out of obstinacy.

But I think the devil is most delighted when he can get some Christians to act unfaithfully in one direction, and other Christians to act unfaithfully in the other direction, and then get those two groups of Christians to attack one another. That has to be the jackpot for him.

Now, I’m not saying that anyone who has strong feelings on this one way or the other is necessarily blind to one of those temptations – not at all. But I am saying that there is a danger for each one of us to be blind to one of those temptations, and thus to fall into sin. I’m not talking about the ethical conclusions we draw as much as the dispositions of our hearts as we draw them.

You know ... the Christians in our congregation whom I have most admired in the last six months – whom I have looked at and wanted to emulate – are not those who have necessarily agreed with me on how to handle each aspect of the current situation. They are those who have seen the whole spiritual battlefield and taken it all seriously. They are those who have humbly and soberly addressed the threat to their souls, and to Christ’s church, from multiple directions. They are the ones I have looked at and found myself thinking, “Man ... I do not agree with them on some things ... but I want to be like them in their Christian walk. I want to take seriously the whole spiritual battlefield the way that they do.”

It takes humility to see the full battlefield. Because it means admitting that our hearts are more at risk to temptation than we’d usually like to think. It takes humility, but it is humility that all we desperately need.

Of course, this is just one small example of where this truth plays out.

We could consider others.

We are a congregation that highly values intellectual engagement with the Scriptures and aesthetic beauty in our worship. I love those things about us. We believe that intellectual preaching and beautiful worship are parts of how we love God with all our heart and with all our mind.

We rightly see the spiritual dangers in our culture of anti-intellectualism and the disparagement of beauty. And it is so good that we see those things.

But as we do that, we must beware.

Because there is another battlefield behind us that we can be tempted to ignore. It is the battlefield that tempts us into intellectual elitism and aesthetic snobbery. It is the battlefield that tempts us to look down on and dismiss Christians who lack our academic orientation or our aesthetic sensibilities.

We can too often see the Philistines clearly while forgetting about the Moabites. Our primary calling is not to stop and debate which enemy is the biggest threat, our call is to engage in battle on both fronts, as necessary.

Some Christians rightly see the dangers of moral laxity, but can fail to see the threat of pharisaical moralism. Some Christians are focused on the threat of works-based righteousness, but fail to see the dangers of moral laxity – of antinomianism.

Some Christians rightly see the temptations of the world and the call to build a thick and formative culture in the Church, but they fail to see the threat of abandoning the evangelistic mission Christ has given his Church. Other Christians are rightly concerned with maintaining the mission, but fail to see the dangers of neglecting to building up the Church.

We could go on. We are all tempted, in each aspect of the Christian life, to see one part of the battlefield while ignoring three or four others. This is not primarily a matter of intelligence or even abstract wisdom. It's a matter of humility. It feels good to think we've got the enemy pinned and in our sights. It's humbling to realize that threats surround us on all sides.

But God's king sees the full battlefield, and he is engaged with the full battlefield. As his people, as soldiers in his army, we are called to do the same.

That's the first thing we see here.

THE KING CARRIES OUT GOD'S TIMING:

The second thing we see is that God's king carries out God's timing.

This is a point I have recently made in Second Samuel, but it is worth making it again.

Second Samuel chapter eight describes a great expansion of Israel's territory, in all directions: north, south, east, and west. And the result of that expansion brings Israel's territory under David to fully match what was promised to Abraham in Genesis chapter fifteen. [Roberts; Leithart, 225]

It was a promise made to Abraham a thousand years before David's reign, and it is only just now, here in Second Samuel chapter eight, being fulfilled.

That thousand-year gap is another reminder that God's timing is not our timing.

We are an impatient people. We are a people with a very narrow historical view of things. We are a people who lack historical perspective, and who often hyper-focus on the here and now.

We can do this in our own lives as we insist on or demand results from our efforts in our lives right away, or as we give up quickly in our spiritual pursuits if we don't see the effects we desire immediately, or as we get angry with God or even lose faith in him when he does not answer our prayers according to our timing, or work in someone else's life according to our desires.

This is a temptation in so many ways in our personal and spiritual lives.

But it is also a major temptation in how we relate to the world around us. As events unfold around us, we can lose all perspective, hyper-focusing on the immediate, and failing to consider God's work and God's timing.

I, literally at one point this week found myself repeatedly refreshing multiple news sites, opinion pages, and twitter, frantically trying to get access to more predictions about all the implications of breaking news about an event that had occurred less than an hour before that moment. From a biblical standpoint, there's something quite insane about that.

God has his timing. It is not ours. We expect or we demand that either collapse or full restoration come immediately. But we serve a God who, in his wisdom, will take thousands of years to fulfill his purposes, if he sees fit.

Thankfully, God's king knows this. David knew it. And more importantly, Christ knows it. Our calling is to drop our timelines for how God should work in our lives, in our church, in our nation, or in our world, and set out on the work he has given us to do, trusting in his timing above our own.

The king carries out God's timing. That's the second thing we see here.

THE KING SHOWS BOTH JUSTICE AND MERCY TO HIS ENEMIES:

The third thing we see here is that the king shows both justice and mercy to his enemies.

First of all, David brings God's justice on God's enemies. The conquest, again and again in the Old Testament, is explained not only as God giving a land to his people Israel, but also as him bringing just judgment on the nations in the land who had rebelled against him. Israel's conquest and subsequent battles in the land are not models for modern warfare, but they are pictures of God's judgment on all who reject him and refuse to repent.

With the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites and the forces serving Hadadezer we see a combination of God's judgment and mercy working through David. In each case many are struck down in judgment. In each case many are spared and made servants, in mercy.

Maybe the most striking example is the Moabites in verse two. We might have many questions here, but the Bible gives us few answers. We don't know how the conflict with Moab began. We don't know why David struck down two thirds of Moab's army after the fact – it's possible this was an act of judgment from God, but we don't know – we're simply not told. [Roberts]

In any case, judgment comes through David, God's king.

But so does mercy. While we might be struck with the harsh brutality of David's treatment of the Moabite soldiers, one commentator points out that in David's time and place, "where all captured troops could be put to death, David's actions might be viewed as lenient." [Firth, 396; Roberts]

David, God's king, shows both justice and mercy to God's enemies. And that is a combination we often struggle with.

Some of us, as modern people, struggle with the idea of God's judgment. We might struggle with it at an intellectual level, at an emotional level, or both. But at the root of our discomfort with God's judgment is usually a conviction that God exists to serve us, rather than that we exist to serve God. It is a modern secular view that sees human pleasure and freedom as the highest goods, which not only we, but God also, is obligated to serve.

But the Bible tells us that humanity was made to love and to serve God. Of course, God is loving, and he has given wonderful blessings to humanity and a noble calling. Those are all gracious gifts. But those who reject his calling, who spurn his gifts and demand that he serve them – that he be the servant of their desires and choices – the Bible assures us that those who follow that path will be judged. Psalm 110, which the New Testament tells us is about Christ, says that Christ the King will fill the nations with corpses.

We get just a shadowy picture of that judgment here, in the justice God carries out here through David.

But what should really shock us in the midst of it, is his mercy.

David spares many among the rebels – he shows mercy to those who have rejected God and God's people.

And in this also he shows forth Christ. For that is how each of us got here this evening. We were rebels who were shown inexplicable mercy.

Of course, David does not simply show them mercy and then send them on their way to do as they please. No – he makes them servants. He recruits them as servants of the kingdom of God. And that is key. We'll say more about that in a few minutes.

For now, the third thing we see is that God's king shows both justice and mercy to his enemies.

THE KING IS ANCHORED IN GOD'S PROMISES:

Fourth, God's king is anchored in God's promises.

What is described here in chapter eight is directly rooted in God's promises given to David in chapter seven.

In Second Samuel 7:10 God said to David "I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly."

David receives this promise in chapter seven, and anchored in that promise, he goes out to do the work God has called him to do in chapter eight. [Roberts]

The sequence this is told in seems to imply that David went forth not anchored in a confidence in his own ability, but in God's promise. And the story so far emphasizes that David did not hang back in fear, though that would have been quite rational if it were not for the promises of God.

Remember, it was only back in First Samuel 13 that we were told that the Philistines had enough power to keep the Israelites from even acquiring weapons with which to oppose them. It was only eight chapters ago that we read of the Philistines defeating the Israelite army and killing King Saul along with Jonathan.

Avoiding a battle with such a powerful enemy would be rational if one were anchored in a worldly assessment of power. But David was rooted in God's promises. And so he goes out to battle. And the results are shocking.

David takes Metheg-ammah, which First Chronicles seems to imply is a reference to Gath – the mother city of the Philistines [Firth, 394; Roberts]

God brings unexpected results through David his king, as David walks in a way that is anchored not in worldly powers, but in the promises of God.

Now ... there are a number of ways that we can fail to be anchored in God's promises.

One is a form of self-confident optimism. We put our hope not in God's promises, but in our own abilities, or our culture's abilities, and so we embrace a sort of sunny humanism and over-confidence in our human abilities.

There's not a ton of that going on at the moment. So, while I want to acknowledge that temptation, I'm not going to elaborate on it much.

The more common outlook at the moment is the opposite: It's an outlook of paranoid catastrophizing.

We can do this in a number of ways, of course. We can do it in our personal lives by becoming more and more convinced that everyone and everything is out to get us, and in the end everything will go badly.

But we especially see this tendency right now in our culture and in our politics.

Now, a disclaimer. Paranoia and catastrophizing are not inherent to culture or to politics. The best thinkers and actors in our culture and our politics right now resist this temptation, just as they resist the temptation to overly self-confident optimism. And there are such thinkers and leaders in our culture and in our politics. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the temptation, across the board, to paranoid catastrophizing.

What does that look like?

Well, what it looks like is the fact that many on the political and cultural left are deeply convinced that the right is out to get them, and that if the right wins the next round of political and cultural battles, then Armageddon and catastrophe are just a step away.

It also looks like the fact that many on the cultural and political right are deeply convinced that the left is out to get them, and that if the left wins the next round of political and cultural battles, then Armageddon and catastrophe are just a step away.

But wait – there’s more. If you just let yourself off the hook for either of those temptations, you should know that there’s a third one. There are also centrists and smaller groups of alternative perspectives that are deeply convinced that both the left *and* the right are out to get everyone, and in the very process of the next round of their political and cultural battles, they are likely to bring about such disaster that Armageddon and catastrophe will be just a step away.

Now – I don’t mean to say that there’s not some scary political and cultural stuff ahead of us. I don’t mean to say that the threat is all in our heads.

As it’s put in a phrase sometimes attributed to Joseph Heller, and popularized more recently by the late-twentieth-century cultural thinker Kurt Cobane: “Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re not after you.”

Of course that is true. I’m not speaking to how accurate each of these assessments are.

But I do want to turn that phrase around and consider its counterpart: “Just because they’re after you, doesn’t mean you’re not irrationally paranoid.”

We can face real threats and still be guilty of unfaithfully paranoid catastrophizing, just as we can have real success and still be guilty of unfaithfully self-assured arrogance. The root issue is not whether our predictions are correct or flawed – the root issue is where we are anchored.

Unfaithful self-assurance believes that if *we* are in control then everything will turn out fine. Unfaithful paranoid catastrophizing believes that if someone we disagree with is in control, then everything will come apart.

But Christian faith holds to the fact that since God is in control, we can – and we must – anchor our lives in *his* promises to us.

That doesn’t mean that we deny successes or threats in our lives or in the world around us. But we can stay steady through them all because we are anchored not in our control, but in God’s control – we are rooted not in our plans but in God’s promises.

David received God’s promises in chapter seven, and here he proceeds not in self-confidence or in paranoid fear – he proceeds with faith anchored in the power and promises of God.

That’s the fourth thing for us to see here.

So:

- God’s king sees the whole battlefield
- God’s king carries out God’s timing
- God’s king shows both justice and mercy to his enemies, and
- God’s king is anchored in God’s promises.

THE KING CALLS US TO TRUST & SERVE HIM:

Fifth and finally, God’s king calls us to trust and serve him.

David's recruitment into the kingly mission that God has given him is everywhere in this chapter. In verse two we read not only that David had mercy on one third of the Moabites, but that those he spared became servants of his kingdom.

In verse four we read of those whom David took from among the army of Hadadezer. It's worth noting that while David takes from the foot soldiers of Hadadezer, he destroys most of their chariot horses. This might seem odd to us, or even cruel. But in Deuteronomy seventeen God had warned future kings about placing their trust in horses [Deuteronomy 17:16], and in First Samuel 8 the prophet Samuel warned against a worldly king who would rely on chariots [1 Samuel 8:11-12]. David here will recruit the men of Hadadezer to serve God's purposes, but he will not place his trust in Hadadezer's worldly power.

In verse six we read how the Syrians became servants of David, and in verse fourteen how the Edomites became his servants.

All these were involuntary servants. But the chapter tells of David recruiting voluntary servants as well. In verses nine and ten, Toi, king of Hamath voluntarily pays tribute to David. And in verses fifteen through eighteen we read of those who serve in roles of authority in David's kingdom.

Joab is mentioned, whom we have seen problems with in the past. But the priests listed, among others, were faithful servants of David. David's sons are also mentioned as priests, but this is unlikely to be an overt violation of the Levitical requirements for the priesthood and might refer to a religious role they played in the royal house, or the term might serve a secular function here, referring to a role in the king's administration. [Firth, 399; Roberts]

Either way, what we see is that God's king recruits many into his service, and in those roles, he calls them to trust and to serve him.

And, of course, Jesus does the same with us.

Our calling is to answer his summons well.

We may have begun, in some ways, as unwilling servants – like the Moabites or the Edomites. If so, our calling is to see the King as he is, to see what an honor it is to have any role in the kingdom of Christ, and to seek to be faithful and willing servants going forwards.

Others may long to be a servant in Christ's kingdom, but we fear our past or our deficiencies might disqualify us. Yet the range of people recruited to serve David reminds us what God can do with even the weakest and most flawed of us. We are called to follow Christ and to serve, entrusting the results to him.

And if we are ambitious in the kingdom of Christ, and confident in ourselves, we are warned here. We have seen Joab misuse his high position in the past. We will see David do the same in the future. We are to respond to Christ's call to serve his kingdom, but our purpose and our confidence must always be in him, and not in ourselves.

Christ is our king. He has conquered us in love. Our calling is to serve his kingdom as faithful loyal subjects.

CONCLUSION:

In David, our text tonight gives us a picture of Christ our king, and of what it looks like for us to walk by faith. The challenge is not just to hear it, but to apply it to our lives, and to walk in its ways.

What does the spiritual battlefield look like for you? Not just the front you see most clearly before you, in the West – but what are the spiritual threats to your right, in the South, or to your left, in the North, or to your back in the East? David’s example calls you to ask Jesus your King to give you humble eyes to see them all.

As you face those battles, what does it look like for you to trust God’s timing? How have you been impatient, how have you been insistent on your own schedule and your own timeline for your life and for the world around you? God calls on you to trust his timing and his work.

As you do that, how do you need to be anchored in God’s promises? How do you let yourself be tossed to and fro by every personal success or failure – how do you let yourself be tossed up and down by every cultural shift and piece of breaking news? God calls you to lift your anchor from such unstable things and place it instead in his promises to you in Jesus Christ. For *that* will hold you firm and steady when nothing else will.

And finally, how have you been shown mercy and recruited to serve God’s great King? Jesus Christ has had mercy on you when you deserved justice and judgment. And now you are his. And he has recruited you for his mission. Your life is not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore, seek his kingdom in this world, and not your own. Fill the role he has called you to, for the good of Christ’s kingdom, and the glory of our God.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Alter, Robert. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

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