

IN SERVICE TO KING SAUL

1 Samuel 16:14-23

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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" (1 Sam. 16:18).

It is often said that "things happen for a reason." That expression does not necessarily indicate a biblical faith in God, but may also reflect Eastern religious ideas of fate or karma. But Christians learn from the Bible that the saying really is true. Things do not merely happen for a reason in general, but the events of our own lives happen for God's holy, wise, and infinitely good purposes. Things especially happen in order that God's saving plan for history will be accomplished through the gospel of Christ. According to the apostle Paul, everything happens "according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph 1:11).

We cannot always see God's sovereign hand guiding our lives, but we do see this when it comes to the lives of great figures in the Bible. The life of young David provides one example. David was tending his father's flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem when a summons came to appear before the prophet Samuel. When David arrived, the great spiritual leader anointed him by pouring oil over his head. This happened for a reason, as the Lord had stated to Samuel: "I have provided for myself a king" (1 Sam. 16:2).

We are not told what immediately happened in David's life. Presumably, he went back to his fields, although we can imagine his father taking more of an interest in his youngest son and Samuel interacting with him as the opportunity arose. But in time a new

summons arrived for David, this time from King Saul. As David entered into Saul's service as court musician, the youth may not have understood how or why this was happening. But David could be sure that this summons had arrived for a purpose, just as all of God's people may be confident that God's gracious reasons are guiding the events of our lives.

AN EVIL SPIRIT FOR KING SAUL

When last we considered Saul, Israel's king had run afoul of God and his prophet, Samuel. The Lord had given Saul one last chance to obey his Word, but Saul had followed the counsel of his and the peoples' greed instead of God's commands. As a result, Samuel told him: "You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:26).

To all appearances, this spiritual dismissal had little effect on the actual affairs of Saul and his kingdom. God had rejected Saul, but Saul remained king. Thus it is that most people today believe that the spiritual arena has little influence over worldly matters – things like who is in charge and who is getting ahead in life. But Saul's experience reminds us that, in fact, the spiritual realm is primary over the material realm, and that God's spiritual arrangements will unfailingly determine material and worldly outcomes.

God's rejection of Saul had two immediate results. The first was that "the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 16:14). Saul had received God's Spirit at the time of his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam. 10:10). This does not mean that Samuel was born again to a saving faith, but rather that God's Spirit was providing Saul the supernatural equipping for the calling that God had given him. Now, Saul had been rejected by the Lord and David had been anointed in his place. When David was anointed, "The Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). In coming to David the Spirit had departed from King Saul. No longer blessed with God's supernatural equipping, Saul would have to face his challenges in his own strength.

This should remind us that there is no greater blessing than the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit that

sinner believe in Jesus and receive salvation (Jn 3:3-7; 1 Cor. 2:14). In his teaching on prayer, Jesus presented the Holy Spirit as the chief of all God's blessings. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children," Jesus taught, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk. 11:13). Nothing can replace the power and blessing of God's Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit we may possess all things, but we will have them without blessing; with the Spirit we may lack everything else and yet be filled with joy. Paul wrote, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

What is true of individuals is also true of the Church. What can the church accomplish if it has the most effective programs, the most well financed advertising, the most polished musical performers, and the most attractive celebrity speakers? Such churches can accomplish much in a worldly sense but virtually nothing of spiritual value. Meanwhile, a church that has no worldly advantages, but faithfully ministers God's Word, prayer, and the sacraments may accomplish great things in the light of eternity through the power of God's Spirit. "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus declared (Jn. 15:5). We can do many things apart from Christ, but spiritually and eternally, they are nothing. But with God's Spirit, Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). Realizing this, we should count the withdrawal of God's Spirit as the chief possible calamity and the presence of God's Spirit the greatest of helps. Nothing of the world can compensate for the loss of God's Spirit, but with the Spirit's power, even the weakest of God's people can do mighty things.

It was bad enough for Saul to have God's Spirit depart from him. But the second result of the Lord's rejection was even worse. God also judged Saul for the sins that caused his rejection: "and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him" (1 Sam. 16:14). This statement has troubled readers, especially since it is translated in some translations as "an evil spirit" that God sent to Saul. Does this mean that God was in collusion with evil, perhaps demonic powers, and that he used them to do violence against his enemies?

Commentators have tried to resolve this apparent difficulty in a couple of ways. Some have argued that Old Testament writers tended to ascribe everything to God, to the neglect of human causation. Walter Brueggemann complains that “the world of biblical perspective is a world without secondary cause. All causes are finally traced back to the God who causes all.”¹ From this perspective, Andrew Blackwood argues that what the primitive biblical writers ascribed to God and spirits was really no more than “intermittent mental aberrations.”² Saul’s problem was therefore psychological, not supernatural. The problem with this reasoning is that the Bible does in fact acknowledge both ultimate and secondary causes, and also contains a sophisticated, if not modern, psychological understanding. A second approach to explaining this text does not deny the spiritual or even supernatural cause, but does deny that God was the source. This view states that the Holy Spirit’s departure merely opened the way for demonic affliction, since any person without the Spirit “is easy prey for Satan.”³ The problem with this explanation is that the text explicitly states that the spirit tormenting Saul was “from the LORD.”

In understanding the text, we need not understand this as an “evil” spirit, but rather as a “harmful” spirit (as the English Standard Version renders it).⁴ The spirit – presumably an angel – was not himself evil, but rather he was sent by the Lord to bring harm upon King Saul. This may not seem to resolve much of the difficulty, since whether the spirit was himself evil or not, we still have God harming someone, despite the Bible’s teaching that “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8).

The answer is that this spirit of harm was sent by the Lord as an act of judgment on Saul’s sin. Robert Bergen explains: “Saul’s tortured state was not an accident of nature, nor was it essentially a medical condition. It was a supernatural assault by a being sent at the Lord’s command, and it was brought on by Saul’s disobedience.”⁵ Saul’s

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 125.

² Andrew W. Blackwood, *Preaching from Samuel* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1946), 123.

³ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 166.

⁴ For a careful argument in favor of a “harmful” spirit, or “a spirit which brings forth disaster,” see David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 427.

⁵ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 182.

repeated disobedience to God's commands had brought not only his rejection as king but also God's judgment in the form of this heaven-sent spiritual torment. God is love, and therefore he hates all evil, including Saul's sins. Saul's judgment is a warning of the far greater torment that souls in hell will experience as a result of God's deliberate and, in that case, eternal punishment for sin.

Without doubt, Saul's harmful spirit manifested itself in psychological aberrations that were unstable, hostile, and sometimes even dangerous (see 1 Sam. 18:10-11). Saul, once so impressive a young man, has now become gloomy and unstable. This was, of course, noticed by his court. Saul's followers thus sought a remedy to his torment and, no doubt, their own: "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 evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well" (1 Sam. 16:16).

Notice that the advisors recognized that the source of Saul's problem was his alienation from God: "Behold now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you," they said (1 Sam. 16:15). Yet their remedy was a superficial one. The playing of the lyre was widely held in the ancient world to combat evil spirits, and we know today the soothing power of soft music. Yet Saul's problem was his sin against the Lord. Spiritually sound advice would urge the king to turn to the Lord in sincere and heartfelt repentance. God's grace is always available to anyone who will repent and believe: "Return to me... and I will return to you," is God's rule with sinners suffering misery and judgment (Zech. 1:3).

Biblically minded counselors seem to have been absent from Saul's court, and his advisors could think only of addressing the psychological symptoms of what was a spiritual problem. Gordon Keddie writes: "Having diagnosed the need for heart surgery, they proceeded to prescribe a sedative!"⁶ While we should acknowledge that not all psychological struggles stem directly from spiritual roots, it remains the case that unrepented sin is often the cause for emotional, psychological and even physical distress. Saul, however, thinking on no higher a plane than his advisers, consented with their

⁶ Gordon Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom*, 166.

plan: he ordered, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me” (1 Sam. 16:17).

DAVID SOUGHT FOR SAUL’S SERVICE

It was at this point that God’s providence openly entered the scene. We can imagine the huddle of Saul’s advisers wondering who they would get to play the lyre (a stringed instrument that looked like a small harp) for the king. It turned out that one of them had “seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite” who he believed was “skillful in playing.” Now that he thought about this son of Jesse, he realized how ideal the young man would be for Saul’s court, describing him as “a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence” (1 Sam. 16:18). We do not know what circumstances produced this kind of high recommendation. But we do know the last thing said about David, which accounts for it all: “the LORD is with him” (1 Sam. 16:18).

We should consider each of these statements, which should characterize not only David but any young man or woman with a living faith in the Lord. First, David was commended for his courage and ability: “a man of valor, a man of war.” David did not grow up in peaceful times. Philistine forces were often seen within a few miles of Bethlehem, a situation that “might afford him opportunities of boyish valour.”⁷ In the next chapter, David’s famous victory over the giant Goliath, David remarks to King Saul that he has fought bears and lions in his duties as a shepherd (1 Sam. 17:37). Later, after killing the giant, David took his severed head and displayed it before the city of Jerusalem, which at that time was an unconquered Jebusite fortress (1 Sam. 17:54). This action is never explained, but it suggests that David had dealings with that nearby enemy stronghold and had taken it upon himself to issue them a challenge on behalf of Israel. All of this material pictures an idealistic, resourceful and courageous young man, which is exactly what a living faith in the Lord should produce.

⁷ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 267.

Next, David was “prudent in speech.” This, too, should be emphasized in the training of Christian youths. The Bible consistently links the mouth and the heart, so that the way that we speak indicates the tenor of our spiritual life. The book of Proverbs says that we must guard our hearts as the wellspring of life, and then immediately adds: “Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you” (Prov. 4:23-24). Jesus likewise said that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt. 12:34). Godly speech is learned through the Word of God and is a fitting object for prayer. David asked the Lord in Psalm 19:14, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”

A person who is prudent in speech will usually also possess a “good presence,” which is the next compliment told about young David. This seems to indicate a confident and positive demeanor. Some of us are blessed with natural beauty and some of us are not. But we can all bear ourselves with godly dignity and respect for others, and if we do our good presence will commend the grace of God in our lives.

Given this description of David, we would not be surprised to learn that a spiritual giant like Samuel had been involved with him after his anointing. Godly mentoring is of great value to any believer, and young people should seek role-models first in their believing parents and then in other mature believers. We remember that a godly legacy extended down through David’s family. His great-grandmother was Ruth, the Moabitess, and the kind of loyalty she showed her mother-in-law Naomi is evidenced in David. His great-grandfather was Boaz, the redeemer-kinsman who had acted with both charity and strength in taking Ruth for his wife. David may well have grown up in the house where Ruth and Boaz formerly lived, and their spiritual legacy would have been deeply impressed within those rooms.

The description given of young David is a good agenda for the mentoring of any Christian, especially a young one. The key to it all is David’s last accolade: “the LORD is with him” (1 Sam. 16:18). Today, the Lord is with everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ, just as the Lord’s voice is heard in his Word and the Lord’s presence is felt in believing prayer. The way for us to experience spiritual growth

and to develop a gracious character is to be often with the Lord and through faith to know that the Lord is with us.

DAVID IN SERVICE TO KING SAUL

Based on this outstanding recommendation, “Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, ‘Send me David your son, who is with the sheep’” (1 Sam. 16:19). Receiving the summons, David’s father obeyed, sending David along with bread, wine, and a young goat. In this way, “David came to Saul and entered his service” (1 Sam. 16:21).

Remarkably, it was by Saul’s own command that the man anointed by God to replace him was brought to the royal court. Things were happening for a reason! In Saul’s presence, David would be schooled in matters of state and have opportunities to reflect on the practice of leadership. The change of scenery must have been jarring for young David, moving from the pastoral setting outside Bethlehem to the intense and spiritually challenged setting of Saul’s court. If the psalms are any reflection, the experience deepened David’s faith and exposed him to the wide varieties of human experience, all of which may be brought before the Lord in prayer.

David’s job was to play the lyre when Saul was in an evil mood, and David performed this well: “whenever the evil 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 evil spirit departed from him” (1 Sam. 16:23). Saul could only be truly restored through repentance, but in the meantime, David’s ministry helped both the king and those who needed to interact with him.

Seeing firsthand the effects of Saul’s hardened heart towards the Lord must have made a great impression on David. Perhaps it was the warning received in these early days that made David so willing in later years to humble himself before the Lord and repent of his sins. David would learn what it meant to have God’s hand heavy upon him, and his spirit groaning day and night because of sin (Ps. 32:3-4). But David had learned what to do when this happened. He relates, “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5).

In the meantime, David was a servant of God's restraining grace in Saul's life. One commentator says: "Thus David was a blessing to Saul and thereby also to Israel. Because of David's presence, Saul's mind was not immediately and wholly disabled, and Israel's affairs were not completely thrown into confusion."⁸ David sets an example for believers today who find themselves in service to a difficult employer or responding to troubled parents. Even when we must submit to higher authorities, Christians can make a great difference, bringing light into darkness and providing salt to preserve life and bring a pleasant flavor to any situation (see Mt. 5:13-14). Meanwhile David received an education in the wages of sin and the peril of disobedience to the Lord, along with exposure to the art of kingcraft as practiced by Saul. His later conduct indicates that he respected Saul and learned to hold the king in high esteem. Christians also should convey respect to those who are placed by God in authority over us, seeking to profit from both their good and bad examples, and to prepare ourselves for later service as the Lord may be pleased to employ us.

David served Saul so well that the king "loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer" (1 Sam. 16:21). We need not understand that Saul held an intense personal affection for David, since this statement can merely mean that Saul liked what he saw in David. The next chapter will show that when removed from the court setting, Saul did not recognize David or remember his name. David was, however, given the position of Saul's armor-bearer, which made the young shepherd one of the king's comrades in arms. David thus lived out the words later written by the apostle Paul, who taught that Christian servants should serve "with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man" (Eph. 6:5-7). Believers who follow David's example in the workplace will often find themselves growing in the esteem of their leaders and advancing into positions of greater authority and responsibility.

⁸ S. G. DeGraaf, cited from Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King*, 26.

THE LORD IS WITH HIM

The point of these verses is not, however, to hold David up as a model employee. Rather, David shows what a difference it makes for God to be with us. “The LORD is with him” is the decisive statement for understanding young David (1 Sam. 16:18). In fact, it was because of his God-given faith that David served as such a good role-model for Christians, and, more significantly, that he typified for us the character and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, too, was able to live his perfect life, teach his divine words, and work his mighty miracles because the Lord was with him. This was the point of the very first sermon Jesus preached: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (Lk. 4:18).

God was with David because the Lord had determined to provide a king for himself to rule over Israel. Likewise, God was with Jesus Christ, because God the Father was providing his Son to be the Savior of the world. Jesus is in fact much greater than David, since not only was God’s Spirit in him, but the apostle John could say of him: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). In Jesus Christ, not only did God’s Spirit come upon a man, but the eternal Son of God took up human flesh, and he was called “Immanuel,” “God with us” (Mt. 1:23).

David’s sweet music was able to soothe Saul’s troubled mind for a while. But the sweetest music ever heard in this troubled world was the angel song announcing the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Lk. 2:14). Jesus came not merely to soothe us in our sinful misery but to deliver us from our sin (see Mt. 1:21). Saul was blessed to listen to David’s playing, but he failed to follow up on those moments of clarity in order to seek a deeper and true healing for his ills.

Are you troubled? Are you gripped by cravings and godless passions? Are you worried by the anxieties of life or concerned for the guilt of your sins? Jesus calls us to listen to his voice and through faith in him to receive the true healing our souls require: to be

forgiven of our sins, to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, to be embraced by God as dearly beloved children, and to receive from God the free gift of new and eternal life. Not only does Jesus, like David, possess God's Spirit, but he gives God's Spirit in abundance to those who receive him in faith. Jesus said, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (Jn. 6:63, NKJV). The sweet music of his gospel speaks true peace to our troubled souls.

Remember that everything happens for a reason? The reason the message of salvation in Christ is preached today is that many who are troubled by the misery of sin would hear his voice, believe in him, and be saved. Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).