

Notes on I Samuel 17 – 24

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Chapter 17 – 18

The Spirit of the Lord had come powerfully on David. Now we see the result of this and the way David came to public attention. Goliath had terrorised Israel's troops because they had no practical knowledge of the fact that the Lord was with them. David had learned in his shepherding that he could rely on God to protect his flock.

David's asking questions about the Philistine giant annoyed his brothers, but his purpose was not to avoid other duties, or to play the role of hero. Rather, he wanted to stir the troops to realise what this Philistine was doing. God's ownership and protection of Israel and her armies had been questioned. The Spirit of God in him was provoked. So, Saul and Israel again had the benefit of prophetic courage and Saul gave him his blessing: 'May the Lord be with you!'

David dealt with Goliath with the simplicity of what he knew, but especially with his jealousy for the name of the Lord. His ambition was that the world knows there was a God in Israel. His conviction was that God would demonstrate his care for Israel by working without the use of superior power. So Israel gained a victory, and Saul made closer enquiry as to whom he would have to reward.

We have been told that Saul already loved David and benefited from his music. This story implies that he knew nothing of David. This may be because he had given little attention to the details of those who served him.

Saul now made sure that David stayed with him. His kingdom depended on such men. His son Jonathan stood to gain nothing politically from a rival, however he took David into his heart. They enjoyed the fellowship that arises from a shared trust in God (cf. 14:6–15).

Saul used David because of his wisdom and the success that came from this, but then he had to deal with David's popularity with grateful women and with the troops he led. His need for David turned to suspicion, rage, dread, and then to cunning. Perhaps the evil spirit from the Lord was meant to awaken him to what his life had become. However, knowing that God had left him and was with David only focussed his whole life on removing this new servant of the Lord. He thought promotion would leave David exposed to the Philistines.

Anger and fear must have blinded him to the significance of the Goliath incident. The king's pleasure was to bring David's life into danger (18:20). However, when David realised he could pay a dowry of Gentile foreskins, it was David's pleasure to have

Michal as his wife. Then, Saul's pleasure turned to even deeper bitterness and fear. Nothing could halt the ascent of David.

Prayer

Father, you have purposed blessing for your people and glory for your name. To this end, you have given to your Son, Jesus Christ, a name which is above every other name, so that everyone should bow to him. Our welfare lies in him alone and we are glad that you have made him Lord. Have mercy on all who fight against your anointed Son. Their lives become bitter and they make trouble for many. Grant to us all the desire for your glory alone, and may faithful love grow between all who trust in you, for the sake of your Son. Amen.

Chapter 19 – 20

Saul had now fallen into the sin of Cain against which elder John warns us (I John 3:11–12). His murderous wishes were temporarily averted by his son's diplomacy but David's further successes drove him back to murder. (David may have written Psalm 59 on this occasion.) This was avoided again by his daughter's cunning. Saul saw these members of his family as enemies but they were true friends. In acting out their delight in David, or love for him, Saul had opportunity for another look at what was really happening. The occasion when Saul sat with spear in hand, and David with a harp, was a parable. David could fight, better than Saul could, but he could also stop and sing with a heart that was glad in God.

So, David fled, to Samuel. He needed to be with another man of the Spirit. This same Spirit protected them by coming upon the servants of Saul, and then, on Saul himself. He prophesied again, as he had done when he was changed into another man (10:6, 9–13). Perhaps this was his opportunity to begin again. However, the tragedy of Saul's life was that the same Spirit who had begun aiding him now frustrated him. The question remained; was Saul really among the prophets? He certainly had opportunity to be so. On the other hand, David was nurtured by the man who anointed him, and by the Spirit of God, and doubtless, by the words of prophecy which were put in his and Samuel's hearts and lips.

Jonathan had reason to be confident of his powers with his father. He had once reconciled his father to David (19:4–6). He said that his father consulted him on everything (20:1). David needed better assurance than this, but his reliance on Jonathan was total. His life was in his covenant partner's hands.

Cf. Psalm 55:12–14, 20.

Jonathan accepted the risk of being a friend to the Lord's anointed. He prayed that God would be with David as he had been with his father, virtually acknowledging the transfer of leadership to David (cf. Saul's reaction to this in 18:14–15; 20:31). He foresaw the time when he (if he survived the transfer of power) and his family, would need the protection of David and his successors on the throne. Love can make great demands (cf. John 14:15), and so it happened now. Jonathan made a covenant with the new dynasty and required a vow from David that his family would be protected. Here was a foretaste of the Jesus who would lay down his life for his friends, and of the disciples who would gladly suffer for God's anointed, and of the rich fellowship Christians would have with one another (John 15:12–13).

Jonathan's word was put to the test. He acknowledged his friend before his perverse father and nearly paid for it with his life. Jonathan knew now that the split between his father and his friend was final and was grieved by the dishonour shown to his friend. So, he told David the news by the arranged signal. David's honour for his loyal friend was total, his tears copious. Jonathan, also with tears, sent him away safely, acknowledging that the Lord was arbiter over what happened from now on. The friendship between these two men had grown through the faith they shared. Both men knew God would favour his people and give them victory. Both had been captured by this grace and it showed in their lives.

Prayer

Father, you have given to all believers, the Spirit of love, and of power and of a sound mind. He does not permit us to fear but enables us to call you Father. By that Spirit, may we put to death the deeds of the body and so live. May no bitter spirit rise up and defile your holy people. Rather, may the covenant love brought to us by your Son, be formed in us, to your glory. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 21 – 22

David now entered a part of his life where he seemed most distant from the purpose of his anointing, but the period is introduced to us with his visit to a priest and (22:10, 15) receiving direction from the Lord.

David had remained faithful to his king and, apart from Samuel, did not know on whom he could rely. For the moment, he resorted to deception. The priest Ahimelech was fearful about David's visit but did not resist his request for bread, even though this was supposed to be eaten only by priests.

Jesus referred to this incident. He said the Pharisees of his own day should overlook his disciples making something to eat on a Sabbath day (Matt. 12:4). Jesus, like David, was about his duties as God's anointed. Under these circumstances, was it more important that the necessities of their life be met or that a ceremonial requirement be observed? Jesus directed his critics to the prophet who said that God desired mercy more than sacrifice (Hos. 6:6). The kingdom of God has in view the establishment of mercy, and his servants need mercy as they go because they are accosted by those hostile to God's reign.

David, however, probably sensed little grandeur on this occasion. He escaped to Philistine country and the city of Goliath, carrying Goliath's sword. He thought he would be safer with his former enemies than with his own king. He barely escaped with his life from this, by feigning madness. Israel knew that there was more to David than this story reveals however, and acknowledged two psalms arising from this occasion. They are Psalms 34 and 56. David was no less in God's hands now than when he strode out to defeat Goliath.

In this stumbling way, David came to establish his first headquarters. His family joined him, perhaps for safety, and because they saw the hand of God on him. (Psalms 57 and 142 have been attributed to this occasion.) However, David must have felt quite isolated because he needed to entrust the care of his parents to a neighbouring king. Others gathered for all manner of personal reasons, but,

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captained by God's anointed, were disciplined to a new purpose. We remember the many outcasts who gathered to Jesus in Galilee. We also are grateful, that we have now been gathered, by our need for the grace of Christ, to be disciplined by him to the service of God's mercy.

It is difficult to trace David's steps here. (Adullam is inside Judah but this may be a different place from 'the stronghold'). David was given a word from the Lord by the prophet Gad that directed him back into Judean territory. (Again, a psalm is attributed to David from this period: Psalm 63.)

Saul appealed to the worldly self-interest of his men. It was all he knew now and all that he had available. He felt himself hunted by David, where, in fact, he was the hunter. Doeg rose to ingratiate himself with Saul by disclosing what he had seen. The priest, Ahimelech, protested that he thought David a faithful servant of Saul. Saul's soldiers were unwilling to attack the priests. These facts may tell us that there was still godliness in Israel, and honour for David. Saul was fighting for his position and had to rely on a dishonourable alien to do his dirty work.

So, the one remaining member of this priestly family, Abiathar, came to David. He came with the ephod, a garment worn by priests when seeking the will of God. David could assure the priest of safety with himself, but nowhere else. Psalm 52 is reputed to have been written by David at this time.

Prayer

Father, the songs you have given to us have not come from our greatness but from your grace to us in our time of need. We are often given up to death for your sake, but in all these things, we are more than conquerors. You have gathered us to your Son, not that we may take vengeance on those who have done us wrong, but that we may be trained by him for every good work. Grant that we may live as his servants. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 23 – 24

It is not clear how long David was hounded by Saul, but while he was on the run, he continued to care for Israel. He had begun his military career defeating the Philistines and Israel still needed relief. He was anointed and the Spirit must have stirred him constantly to be about his calling. So, he enquired of God about each aspect of the battle (and on many later occasions: 30:8; II Sam. 2:1; 5:19, 23; 21:1). How could a king function without the guidance of the Lord? By this, he knew which battles were his to fight, who were his reliable friends and when he should run.

The first anointed shepherd of Israel, King Saul, had become a wolf. His son could recognise God's newly anointed king and, as one who also lived by God's promise and grace, 'encouraged him in God'. He gave him his allegiance and sought his favour. Not so the self seeking Ziphites. David fled further South, and there, was saved from Saul again, this time, because Saul was called to another battle. Then, David went east to Engedi, on the shores of the Dead Sea, an area well described as a wilderness. Still, his spirit sang, as is suggested by two psalms attributed to this period (54 and 63).

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Saul was still thirsty for the defeat, not of the enemies of God but of the one he saw as his rival. God showed him how unnecessary his action was by the incident in the cave. The same incident showed David's men how David feared God above men and would not harm the one God anointed. Then David, with honour, showed that Saul was doing wrong to a man who would do him no harm, and called on God to vindicate him. (Israel saw his thoughts reflected in Psalms 57 and 142 and attributed them to this period.) Saul was forced to acknowledge that his actions were indefensible, and, reluctantly confessed, that David's dynasty would be established rather than his own. He blessed David and asked for favour on his family when this happened, as his son had done so willingly before.

Prayer

Father, where will your church be led if her leaders do not seek you in everything? Where will your people go if her leaders are abandoned by you and seek their own welfare? Often, your church languishes for lack of true shepherds. But you, Lord, have appointed your Son as true King. Reign over us now. Raise up true shepherds. Through all our failures, gather us to yourself. Keep us joyful in your truth today. Above all else, keep us free of self-interest and sure of your coming reign, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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