

THE MADNESS OF KING SAUL

1 Samuel 18:6-30

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, October 25, 2009

“The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, ‘I will pin David to the wall’” (1 Sam (18:10-11)).

History reveals that it is not always safe to live in the company of kings. Consider the case of Black Cleitus. Cleitus was one of Alexander the Great’s leading generals and a commander in his famed Companion Cavalry. At the battle of the Granicus River, Cleitus saved Alexander’s life when the king was disarmed by his enemies. A few years later, after Alexander had conquered the Persian Empire, Cleitus was one of many Macedonians who were disgruntled by Alexander’s embrace of Eastern court practices and his never-ending lust for conquest. During one drunken party in Alexander’s tent, the two men clashed, with Cleitus hurling several insults at the king. Friends separated the two men, but when Cleitus returned to give Alexander one last piece of his mind, the young conqueror grasped his spear, hurled into his general’s chest and killed him. When the drunken fit was over, Alexander was filled with remorse and the army was filled with horror.

Little did Alexander realize that he was taking a page right out of King Saul of Israel’s book. Saul’s jealous hatred for David was even worse than Alexander’s violent fit, since at no time did David display anything but respect and loyalty for his king. But unlike Alexander, Saul did not succeed in slaying David, for God was with him so that even Saul’s persecution led to David’s advancement.

This episode begins a long period of trouble and hardship for young David. It may be ironic that hatred for David appeared immediately after his great achievement in the Valley of Elah and his sudden elevation to prominence, but it is not coincidental. We can see in David's long period of trial and testing, which will continue to the end of 1 Samuel, the hand of God in preparing his servant. William Blaikie writes: "It pleased God, in infinite love, to make David pass through a long period of hard discipline and salutary training for the office to which he was to be raised."¹ We should also note from Saul's reaction to David how little we may rely upon the world's approval and reward. In the days immediately after his triumph over the Philistine giant, Goliath, David began learning the lesson that he later memorialized in Psalm 146:3, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation"

SAUL'S JEALOUS RAGE

The seeds of trouble were sown before either Saul or David returned from the battlefield. "As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments" (1 Sam. 18:6). The outpouring of joy was similar to today's ticker-tape parade. As the women greeted the king, they began singing, "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7).

There is much to criticize in this song, beginning with how injudicious it was. We can understand why David was included in their praise, since he had dispatched the enemy giant, and it was obligatory that Saul be praised as well. The problem was the comparison made between the two and the prominence given to David over Saul. The women were not claiming that Saul had literally killed thousands and David ten thousands. The point was their respective might in slaying Israel's enemies, and the effect was the picturing of David as much more the mighty man than the king. The slight to Saul, though probably unintended, was inevitable.

¹ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 295.

The women's song reveals more than political ineptness, however. Israel's low spiritual state is revealed in the fact that no praise was given to God, but only to men. Compare this with the song of Miriam and the women of Israel after the destruction of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea. Miriam sang, "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex. 15:21). No praise was devoted to Moses, who stretched out his hand over the Red Sea so that it parted, because the people knew that the power and the glory belonged to God alone. It generally reveals a low spiritual level when Christians take after the world in praising men instead of God. Yet this is the very tendency in evidence today in the marketing of celebrity ministers and their empires. We should of course give thanks for able and faithful Christians, but glory should be reserved for God alone.

Hearing the slight praises for himself and the strong praise for David, "Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, 'They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?'" (1 Sam. 18:8). Saul's proud heart, darkened in sinful brooding, could not bear a comparison that was tilted towards another. Far from enjoying the acclamation of the younger hero, who was after all his own servant, Saul looked upon David as a threat to his own regime. The praise for the young hero changed his relationship to King Saul immediately, and "Saul eyed David from that day on" (1 Sam. 18:9).

We should watch carefully against the appearance of an envying spirit within our own hearts. As sinners, we are all prone to such thinking, which corrupts our capacity for joy and sets us needlessly against people who ought to be our friends. If we find ourselves thinking spitefully against others whose gifts surpass our own or resenting praise given to others' achievements, we should mortify this sinful attitude. We chiefly do this by taking the matter to God in prayer, leaving no room for such wickedness to settle in our hearts. Matthew Henry observed: "It is a sign that the Spirit of God is departed from men if they [are] peevish in their resentment of affronts, envious and

suspicious of all about them, and ill-natured in their conduct; for the ‘wisdom from above’ makes us quite otherwise.”²

The safest habit is for us to leave others’ opinions of us to themselves, concerning ourselves more with what God thinks of our character and actions. Saul shows us what becomes true of everyone who craves praise for themselves: he loses the capacity for both joy and love. Not long previously, we were told that “Saul loved [David] greatly” (1 Sam. 16:21). Now, because of his own proud and insecure spirit, Saul begins to loathe and fear a young man who has been nothing but faithful in service to him.

Sins cherished in the heart will invariably express itself through the mouth and the hands, and Saul’s heart burned so bitterly that it took only a single day for his envy to vent itself against David. “The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, ‘I will pin David to the wall.’ But David evaded him twice” (1 Sam. 18:10-11).

It says much about David’s humility that after his public triumph in slaying Goliath, and despite the praise of the nation, he remained in humble service to Saul, continuing to play the lyre in his court. In the past, David’s playing soothed Saul’s evil mood, but now the mere sight of David drove Saul into a violent rage. With a mad impulse, Saul hurled his spear at David, but the athletic youth who had earlier faced Goliath’s great spear was able to evade Saul’s.

The picture of a darkly brooding Saul, walking around his house holding a spear, is one we should consider. Many people live in a similar way, nurturing evil, jealous, or resentful thoughts, and bearing an attitude that is as sharp and almost as dangerous as Saul’s spear. It is no accident when words are thrown at spouses or children that resemble Saul’s weapon hurled against David. How much emotional pain is suffered in homes today by those who permit their minds to dwell in darkness! James wrote, in contrast, “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (Ja. 3:17). What Alexander

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:297.

Maclaren wrote of envy can be said of other dark and angry thoughts: “Let us suppress its beginning. A tiger pup can be held in and its claws cut, but a full-grown tiger cannot.”³

The most important thing for us to realize about Saul is that he is an advanced and concentrated portrait of man in rebellion to God. Saul is just like people today who focus their resentment and frustration on other people when their real problem is God. Saul’s true problem was not David’s popularity, the foolish song of the women, or even the Philistines. Saul’s problem was his hostile relationship with the Lord. We see proof of this in verse 12, which says that Saul perceived that David was blessed by God in a way that he was not. Saul had set his will against the Lord and hardened his resentful heart against God’s commands. God was therefore against Saul, as seen by the “evil spirit” that fed into the king’s jealous rage (1 Sam. 18:10).

Walter Chantry notes that “God’s words and acts cannot be denied and opposed without dire consequences to those who hate what the Lord has established.”⁴ Our secular humanist society proves this point, as rebellion against God’s moral commands inflicts suffering on more and more people whose lives are shattered by abusive homes, sexual promiscuity, and addictions to drugs, alcohol, and gambling. Psalm 1, which speaks of the blessedness of those who love God and his Word, note also that “the wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment... but the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:4-6).

This misery that is God’s down payment on the future judgment of sin was well advanced in King Saul. Unable to call on God’s help, he had cringed in the presence of mighty Goliath, just as secular man today lives in anxiety and fear before powers greater than himself. Then, when David showed the power of God to save those who trust him, Saul hated him for the praise that he won. This is how Isaiah described those in rebellion to God: “The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa. 57:20-21).

³ Alexander Maclaren, 352.

⁴ Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007), 38.

DAVID'S BLESSED HUMILITY

Saul was enraged not merely by David himself but even more so by his awareness that God was with David. The episode with his hurled spear – which, remarkably, happened twice, indicating that David continued to serve him under such circumstances – inspired fear not in David but in Saul, since the king rightly reasoned that God's hand was protecting the young hero. Just as Joseph's bearing in Potiphar's household was such that "His master saw that the LORD was with him" (Gen. 39:3), it was evident to Saul that the Lord was with David. This awareness ought to have caused repentance, but instead it only hardened Saul's mad resolve to end David's life.

With this in mind, Saul removed David from his personal service and put him in command of a military force engaged against the Philistines, reasoning that the odds of David's demise in battle were relatively high. But "David had success in all his undertakings, for the LORD was with him" (1 Sam. 18:15). As a result, the people acclaimed David all the more, so that "when Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in fearful awe of him" (1 Sam. 18:15). This literally states that Saul "dreaded his face," and suggests that Saul suspected that David must be the man after God's own heart who Samuel had said would replace Saul as king (1 Sam. 13:14).

Given David's soaring popularity, Saul could hardly continue open assaults upon his life. But there were other ways to arrange a funeral, and one of them was by dangling the prospect of marriage before the young hero. "Then Saul said to David, 'Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you for a wife. Only be valiant for me and fight the LORD'S battles.' For Saul thought, 'Let not my hand be against him, but let the hand of the Philistines be against him'" (1 Sam. 18:17). This statement reveals Saul's advanced depravity both through its pious mask in seeking David's death and also through his callous treatment of his daughter's heart. Blaikie comments: "nothing shows a wickeder heart than being willing to involve another, and especially one's own child, in a lifelong sorrow in order to gratify some feeling of one's own."⁵

⁵ Blaikie, *1 Samuel*, 303.

We remember that it was at least rumored that the man who slew the Philistine champion would gain the hand of Saul's daughter (1 Sam. 17:25). Far from demanding his right to this prize, however, David humbly pled his unworthiness to be elevated into the royal family. "David said to Saul, 'Who am I, and who are my relatives, my father's clan in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king?'" (1 Sam. 18:18). There is every reason to see this statement as a genuine expression of self-effacing humility. Coming from a poor family, and one in which there was recent non-Jewish blood (as the book of Ruth reveals), David sincerely thought it awkward for him to be married to a woman of such high standing as Merab. In response, Saul gave her hand to someone else, no doubt seeking to drive home an emotional knife: "At the time when Merab, Saul's daughter, should have been given to David, she was given to Adriel the Meholathite for a wife" (1 Sam. 18:19). It is a significant side-note that the five sons of this union were all put to death in later years as payment for Saul's sins against the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21:8).

Sometime after this, Saul learned that another of his daughters, Michal, was in love with David. "The things pleased him. Saul thought, 'Let me give him to her, that she may be a snare for him and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him'" (1 Sam. 18:20-21). Saul evidently believed that Michal's marriage to David would undermine his character or otherwise hinder him. The phrase to "be a snare" is used in other passages for the practice of idolatry (see Ex. 23:33; 34:12; Dt. 7:16). Perhaps, then, Saul thought that Michal would tempt David into idol worship and thus ruin his relationship with God.

This time, Saul's offer was prefaced with words of approval: "Behold, the king has delight in you, and all his servants love you" (1 Sam. 18:22). Their purpose was apparently to alleviate David's reservations about his lower social status. But David still was unsure, especially in light of his impoverished background: "Does it seem to you a little thing to become the king's son-in-law, since I am a poor man and have no reputation?" (1 Sam. 18:23).

There is a sharp contrast in this response to the attitude seen in King Saul. Whereas Saul depicts the pride and fear of a man who is alienated from God, David shows the humility of a true servant of the

Lord. At this stage, it seems that David does not realize that Saul is really planning a funeral, not a wedding. Yet his humility – which Saul can no more fathom than attain – protected David and confounded the king’s wicked schemes. Matthew Henry notes, “It well becomes us, however God has advanced us, always to have low thoughts of ourselves... And, if David thus magnified the honour of being son-in-law to the king, how shall we magnify the honour of being sons (not in law, but in gospel) to the King of kings!”⁶

Seeing how prominence and popularity brought David little more than misery, it is hard to see why Christians would desire to be elevated in the world. Instead, humbly reckoning on our unworthiness, estimating others higher than ourselves, and desiring for any advancement to come from God’s hand alone, wise Christians will resist setting their own names forward for rank and privileges. God asks in Jeremiah 45:5, “Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.” Moreover, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Ja. 4:6). Humility results not merely from an accurate appraisal of our deficiencies, but also from our contentment in God’s provision for our lives. Matthew Henry thus comments:

If we commit our souls, and bodies, and characters, and interests, our way and work into the hands of the Lord, he will bring all to pass that is good for us, and carry us safely through all, to that blessed world where treachery, envy, and malice finds no admission, but perfect love will prevail for evermore.⁷

GOD’S PRESERVING CARE

Saul was determined to enmesh David in marriage to his daughter Michal and in the process to ensure that David remained committed to dangerous service in the war. Therefore Saul responded to David’s plea that he lacked the money to pay a sufficient bride price for the king’s daughter. His servants told David, “The king desires no bride-price except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king’s enemies.” We

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:299

⁷ Cited by Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 180.

further read what is already obvious: “Now Saul thought to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 18:25).

Saul desired this unusual wedding gift not only because of the danger involved in slaying and then removing the foreskins from a hundred Philistine soldiers – this act showing the Israelites detestation for their enemy’s uncircumcised status – but also because even in success David would be so obnoxious to the Philistines that his life would be in grave jeopardy. Not only would the Philistines resist David in battle to their utmost strength, but they would be outraged in offense at this desecration of their dead soldiers.

On these terms, however, David was pleased to enter Saul’s family. Many grooms seek a way to leverage their relationship with their future father-in-law, but the challenge given to David was ideal to his skills and abilities. Before the end of the unspecified time allotted for this bride price, David returned to King Saul and presented his bouquet of not one hundred but two hundred Philistine foreskins. By this means, David had earned his higher status and he claimed Saul’s daughter in marriage.

Saul was mortified, not by the bride price itself but by the implication of David’s achievement. Now he knew even more than before “that the Lord was with David” and that David had stolen the heart even of his own daughter (1 Sam. 18:28). As a result, “Saul was even more afraid of David. So Saul was David’s enemy continually” (1 Sam. 18:29). David’s exploit did so insult the Philistines that their princes came forth to make war, but “as often as they came out David had more success than all the servants of Saul, so that his name was highly esteemed” (1 Sam. 18:30).

This passage reveals the third person who is not only present but whose actions dominate this chapter. We have considered Saul as a classic picture of the mad anxiety that accompanies life without God. David, on the other hand, demonstrates the humility that leads to God’s protection and blessing. Lastly, we are forced to see God himself as the prime actor in these events. As such, David shows us what a difference it makes to be right with God. Whereas Saul is driven through fear and envy into madness, David is led through success to the high esteem of God’s people.

We become right with God not by fulfilling a quest or by doing enough good works, but by accepting his mercy as it was ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ. We are justified by looking back in faith to the Lamb of God, who died for our sins, just as David was justified by looking forward to the blood of Christ (cf. Ps. 51:7). We then are to live by an active faith, of which David in this period of his life was an outstanding example. Through this life of faith we are richly blessed by God. Psalm 1 says of the man of faith: “In all that he does, he prospers” (v. 3). Jesus taught, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn. 15:5).

This is not to say that Christians do not sin, or that those who trust the Lord do not experience trials, failures, and many other hardships, because they do. When it comes to their sins, believers are distinguished from King Saul in that they confess and repent of their sins. In later years, when David fell into great sin, he was willing to repent and thus had his relationship with God restored. “I have sinned against the LORD,” he confessed, and God’s messenger replied, “The LORD has put away your sin” (2 Sam. 12:13).

What about more practical blessings? Does God’s favor mean that all Christians are certain to be rich? The answer is not merely No, but that Christians have something better than material riches: we do not need to be rich in order to be content and satisfied, because God himself fills our hearts. Does this mean that believers will always triumph over the Philistine foes in this world? The answer is No, but God has promised to use even our defeats, like all things, to “work together for the good of those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). Believers will often have cause to repeat before the world the explanation Joseph gave to his brothers: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

This is why Saul was so unnerved by David, since the Lord was with David and for David. It was the same reason that the Roman empire grew to fear and hold the early Christians in awe. As Justin Martyr explained to the emperor in his *First Apology*, “You can kill, but not hurt us.”⁸ This is why savage official persecution of Christians in

⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 2, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:163.

China has not only done nothing to slow the gospel's spread but has actually spurred the expansion of the church, since the people have witnessed the power of God to bless his people even against such affliction.⁹ So it was that the more that Saul sought evil for David the more he feared him. Why? Because the promise of Psalm 121 was true for David, as it is true for all who are owned by God through saving faith: "The LORD is your keeper...; The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life" (Ps. 121:5-7). Most precious to believers is the even greater promise that though the world may sometimes wrongfully hate us, as Saul envied and hated David, "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

BLESS THE LORD, O MY SOUL

If we put together all the sides of the portrait presented in this chapter, we see the strongest motivation for each of us to seek the Lord. Saul had his will set against God, unwilling to obey God's commands and resenting God's judicial opposition in his life. The result of this hardened attitude to God produced the farthest thing from happiness, peace, joy, and success for Saul. Even the things that he possessed – most notably the kingship – he could not enjoy, seeing valid threats all around. Moreover, as he cultivated wicked passions he was driven by God further into madness (1 Sam. 18:10). Saul then discovered that his self-will and spiritual rebellion led him to perform shocking actions. In a similar way, men and women today who live without the blessing of God on their lives do not find satisfaction in life and they often find themselves being led by sin into behaviors they once had scarcely thought themselves capable of committing. Like Saul, their true problem is God. They are not at peace with God and God is not at peace with them, so they will not and cannot find peace with themselves or anyone else.

While the problem of unbelieving men and women is God, he is also the solution. The whole message of Christianity is that God sent his

⁹ An outstanding account of the recent growth of Christianity in China can be read in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, D.C., Regnery, 2003).

Son to die for the sins of his enemies. Paul says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Therefore, if Saul would not return to God and his blessing, through sincere repentance and renewed faith, it would not be because God was unwilling. Many of the greatest sinners in the Bible were accepted by God when they humbled themselves to him in faith.¹⁰ Paul thus wrote: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15).

We then look at David and we see what it looks like to live in the blessing and favor of God. David’s real victory was his humble confidence and delight in the Lord, a blessing that God makes available to all who trust in him. In many respects, of course, David held a unique place in God’s plans, so few others will experience the magnitude of his successes. David depicts for us another who was hated without a cause and who not only was unjustly threatened but was unjustly put to death by his own people. David’s greater son, Jesus Christ, achieved a victory over not just the Philistines but over the evil forces behind them: Satan, sin, and death. In his victory, received by faith alone, we have every blessing, starting with the forgiveness of our sins.

As a result, in the case of Jesus we have an exception to the rule that we should praise God and not man, since he is both man and Son of God. When we consider all that this chapter has shown us about God’s saving presence for his humble people, we have things indeed to sing in praise. We are told three times in this chapter that the Lord was with David, and that made all the difference. Jesus was called Immanuel, “God with us,” and he promises to be with all who look to him in faith (Heb. 13:5). With David, we therefore praise him, saying not merely that he has slain thousands or ten thousands, but singing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul..., who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (Ps. 103:2-4).

¹⁰ Prime examples are king Manasseh in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 33:12-13) and Saul/Paul in the New Testament (Acts 9:1-16).