

1st Samuel: Samuel to king David Chapter 19 - Saul seeks to kill David

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NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

I wonder if you've ever come across the phrase "When you're in a hole stop digging"? It's often said to people who seem intent on making whatever bad situation they are in even worse. The advice is that if you've somehow found yourself in an embarrassing or problematic situation, the best thing to do is to pause for a moment, and at least make sure you don't make things worse. The book of 1 Samuel is an exciting book full of thrilling stories. The stories of Samuel and David teach us lots of great lessons about serving God faithfully. But not every chapter is so positive. Today we've come to chapter 19 in our series on 1 Samuel, and we'll see as we go through it that it's a very sad and negative chapter.

In it, we see King Saul making one bad decision after another. We saw last week in chapter 18 the beginnings of the jealousy Saul felt towards David. In chapter 19 we see this jealousy get worse and worse as Saul persisted in his plans to get rid of David. You could say that he failed to heed the advice I mentioned, and whilst in a hole, he kept on digging. Down and down he went. We could also view the chapter as God giving Saul three warnings, through the circumstances he faced. Three opportunities to change course and turn back to following God faithfully. But sadly, as we'll see through the chapter, Saul failed to heed these warnings. He kept on digging his hole. We'll see in future weeks in our series of 1 Samuel, that Saul had made up his mind and refused to change it. Down and down into his own hole of self-pity, and disobedience to God he went. Before we get in to chapter 19 today, let's remind ourselves what we've learnt about King Saul so far in the book of 1 Samuel. When we were first introduced to Saul in chapters 9 and 10, we saw Saul as a man blessed by God.

We read in 1 Samuel 10:9-13:

"So it was, when he had turned his back to go from Samuel, that God gave him another heart; and all those signs came to pass that day. When they came there to the hill, there was a group of prophets to meet him; then the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them. And it happened, when all who knew him formerly saw that he indeed prophesied among the prophets, that the people said to one another, "What is this that has come upon the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" Then a man from there answered and said, "But who is their father?" Therefore it became a proverb: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" And when he had finished prophesying, he went to the high place."

God authenticated the calling of Saul to be king by sending His Spirit upon him so that he prophesied amongst the prophets. The Spirit of God was again seen upon Saul in chapter 11 as he heroically rescued the people of Jabesh Gilead.

Here's the beginning of the account in 1 Samuel 11:4-6:

“So the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and told the news in the hearing of the people. And all the people lifted up their voices and wept. Now there was Saul, coming behind the herd from the field; and Saul said, “What troubles the people, that they weep?” And they told him the words of the men of Jabesh. Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard this news, and his anger was greatly aroused.”

Everything started pretty well for Saul. But then failure came in. Saul stopped obeying God. In 1 Samuel 15 we read of Saul's failure to properly destroy the Amalekites as God had commanded him to.

Verses 24-29 give us the key part of the story:

“Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD.” But Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.” And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.””

From this point on, Saul knew that his family would no longer be rulers of Israel. At some point, God would take the kingdom and give it to someone else. We know from chapter 16 that the new king would be David. And from the time that David killed Goliath and started to win the hearts of the people, Saul grew increasingly jealous of him. He would not accept that God had chosen someone else to be king.

In chapter 18, which we considered in last week's message on Truth for Today, we saw the first signs of this jealousy. In verses 8 and 9, we read,

“Then Saul was very angry, and the saying displeased him; and he said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed only thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?” So Saul eyed David from that day forward.”

Verse 12 explains that Saul was afraid of David, because he realised that God was with David and not with him. And at the end of the chapter, in verse 29, we read that,

“Saul became David's enemy continually.”

So from a good start, disobedience had set in for King Saul. He had rejected God's chosen king and was determined to get rid of him.

As we come to chapter 19, our subject for today, we see Saul three times plot to kill David. Each time he essentially gets a warning to stop his plotting. In verses 1-7 Jonathan, Saul's own son tries to persuade him not to kill David. Then in verses 8-17 Michal, David's wife and Saul's daughter, helps David to escape and refuses to side with her father against David. Finally in verses 18-24 Saul himself goes after David, but the Spirit of God comes upon him and Saul prophesies before

Samuel. This is a strange event, but I think we'll see that God was giving Saul another warning, and another opportunity to repent. But Saul didn't take advantage of any of the warnings in chapter 19 and continued to pursue his path of disobedience to God.

Verses 1-7 warnings from Jonathan

Let's jump into 1 Samuel 19 then and read the first of Saul's warnings in verses 1-7:

"Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David; but Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted greatly in David. So Jonathan told David, saying, "My father Saul seeks to kill you. Therefore please be on your guard until morning, and stay in a secret place and hide. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak with my father about you. Then what I observe, I will tell you." Thus Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, "Let not the king sin against his servant, against David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his works have been very good toward you. For he took his life in his hands and killed the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great deliverance for all Israel. You saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood, to kill David without a cause?" So Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan, and Saul swore, "As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed." Then Jonathan called David, and Jonathan told him all these things. So Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as in times past."

In these verses we are again reminded of the friendship between David and Jonathan. We saw this last week in verses 1-4 of chapter 18. Even though Jonathan must have realised that God had chosen David to be king and that would mean that Jonathan would not be, Jonathan was still loyal to David and served him faithfully as a friend. Jonathan tried to intercede on behalf of his friend David before his father. He told David to hide himself whilst he went to speak to Saul. Verse 4 tells us that Jonathan "spoke well of David to Saul his father." He reminded Saul that David had served him faithfully and loyally and well. He had brought about a great deliverance for all Israel. Verses 6 and 7 suggest that, at least initially, this pleading had some effect and David was able to return to the palace. It becomes clear as we continue in the chapter that Saul's mind had not really changed, and before too long he was once again plotting to kill David.

Verses 8-17 warnings from Michal

Let's pick up the story and read from verse 8-17:

"And there was war again; and David went out and fought with the Philistines, and struck them with a mighty blow, and they fled from him. Now the distressing spirit from the LORD came upon Saul as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing music with his hand. Then Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he slipped away from Saul's presence; and he drove the spear into the wall. So David fled and escaped that night. Saul also sent messengers to David's house to watch him and to kill him in the morning. And Michal, David's wife, told him, saying, "If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." So Michal let David down through a window. And he went and fled and escaped. And Michal took an image and laid it in the bed, put a cover of goats' hair for his head, and covered it with clothes. So when Saul sent messengers to take David,

she said, "He is sick." Then Saul sent the messengers back to see David, saying, "Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him." And when the messengers had come in, there was the image in the bed, with a cover of goats' hair for his head. Then Saul said to Michal, "Why have you deceived me like this, and sent my enemy away, so that he has escaped? And Michal answered Saul, "He said to me, 'Let me go! Why should I kill you?'"

Evidently, the peace that Jonathan had appeared to broker between Saul and David didn't last long. David went out to battle against the Philistines and won a great victory. As this increased David's fame and reputation amongst the people of Israel you can imagine Saul's jealousy growing and growing. Saul seems to have been prone to these mood swings. In fact the Scriptures make it clear that the cause was that a spirit from God came upon him. One of the remedies to help Saul was that David would play music to sooth him. We first read about this in 1 Samuel 16:23. As Saul's envy of David grew, these music sessions became more and more perilous for David. In 1 Samuel 18 verses 10-11, we learn that David twice escaped from Saul's attempt to pin him to the wall with a spear. Remarkably in chapter 19, David is still playing music for Saul. Verse 10 tells us that again Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his spear. But David was able to slip away, and with the help of his wife, Michal, he escaped through a window of his house, and he fled. To give David time to escape, Michal created a decoy. She took an idol and put it in the bed with a cover over it so that it appeared that David was ill and sleeping in bed. I have to wonder why she had an idol in the house! That seems strange for the wife of David, who would be one of Israel's greatest kings. But the Scriptures don't give us an explanation, so we'll just have to wonder. Eventually Saul sent his men to bring David, even in the bed he was supposedly lying sick in if necessary.

When Saul learned of the deception, he was not happy. Michal's response, and her actions in all of this are not exactly faith-filled. She claims David forced her to help. She doesn't seem quite as loyally attached to David as Jonathan was, but still she was used to help David and thwart Saul's plan to kill him. Once again, Saul had opportunity to reconsider, and change course. But unlike in the first section of chapter 19, there is no evidence Saul even considered leaving David alone for a moment.

Verses 18-24 warnings from God

Let's continue the story reading from verse 18 to 24 of 1 Samuel 19:

"So David fled and escaped, and went to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and stayed in Naioth. Now it was told Saul, saying, "Take note, David is at Naioth in Ramah!" Then Saul sent messengers to take David. And when they saw the group of prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as leader over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied. And when Saul was told, he sent other messengers, and they prophesied likewise. Then Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they prophesied also. Then he also went to Ramah, and came to the great well that is at Sechu. So he asked, and said, "Where are Samuel and David?" And someone said, "Indeed they are at Naioth in Ramah." So he went there to Naioth in Ramah. Then the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on and prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he also stripped off his clothes and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

These are admittedly strange verses, and it takes a bit of thinking to figure out exactly what is going on. David had fled to Samuel in Ramah. News of this reached Saul and he sent three lots of servants to find David and bring him to be killed. Each time, as the servants approached Samuel and the prophets, the Spirit of God came upon them, and they prophesied. This wasn't exactly what Saul wanted. He wanted them to bring David to be executed but instead, the servants he sent started to prophesy. After this had happened three times, Saul went himself to Ramah, no doubt intent to kill David himself. The Spirit of God came upon Saul also and he prophesied all day and all night. The people who saw this must have been amazed and started to ask, "Is Saul amongst the prophets?" It's a bit hard to figure out what's happening in this incident. But it's helpful to realise that this isn't the first time that this has happened to Saul. We read the verses earlier on today from 1 Samuel 10, where the Spirit of God came upon Saul, and he prophesied. On that occasion it seemed to be a confirmation of his calling to become king of Israel. I wonder if the occasion we're considering today in verses 18-24 of 1 Samuel 19 may well have been God's way of reminding Saul of past moments of blessing? Perhaps God was trying one more time to get Saul's attention? He wanted Saul to remember that earlier time in life when God was with him. He wanted Saul to turn from his sinful pursuit of David and go back to trusting Him. If that's the case, then God went to great lengths to get Saul's attention. Sadly, it was all to no avail. Saul had rejected God's rule, and his hatred for David was the main thing on his mind.

As I've said, 1 Samuel 19 is a strange chapter. It's certainly not as memorable as some of the other chapters in the book. But it's an important chapter and I think it gives us two important lessons for us to learn today.

The first lesson we can learn from the chapter is to beware the dangers of sin and be alert to warnings from others. Saul found himself in this downward spiral. In chapter 19 we've considered today he had three warnings. Three opportunities to repent of his actions and turn back to God. But each time he persisted in his sinful path.

James' letter in the New Testament gives us an important warning. Let's listen to chapter 1 verses 13-16.

"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren."

James reminds us that there are many steps towards sin. First, we have desires to sin. Then those desires give birth to sin. Then sin leads ultimately to death. Saul allowed his jealousy and desire to kill David to dwell in his mind. And it affected his actions. It blinded him to the many warnings that he had been given. Let's be sure not to be like that.

What areas of our lives might God be trying to warn us about today? Maybe He is using our friends or our family? Maybe He may warn us directly through some circumstance in life? Could God be trying to get our attention and warn us about some sinful path that we should avoid? Is there an area of my life in which I've realised I'm being disobedient to God? Maybe like Saul I'm consumed by jealousy about something or other? Maybe I can't handle the fact that God is using and blessing someone else much more than He seems to be doing so to me, and that's made me bitter towards someone in the church fellowship I attend? Whatever the situation, let's not be like Saul. Let's not need three warnings from God to get us to repent and turn back to God. Let's not follow sin as far down the path as Saul did. James says, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren."

We started off today with the phrase, “When you’re in a hole, stop digging.” Saul failed to do that. Let’s take a moment to pause today, and not make any situation we are in worse. Let’s ask God to reveal to us any areas that we need to change in our lives before sin takes hold of us and blinds us to God’s attempts to get us to change course.

Or maybe God wants to use us to warn a friend, like he did with Jonathan and Michal in 1 Samuel 19? We need to be really careful with this as lots of things can go wrong if we try and interfere in other people’s lives. Certainly, we need to be aware of taking the plank out of our own eyes before we attempt to remove a speck from our brother’s eye. But in Galatians 6, verse 1, Paul gives this instruction:

“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.”

We need to be careful. We need to be prayerful. We need to be considerate and gentle. We need to consider whether we really have the right kind of caring relationship with someone that they will be likely to hear our concern. But there might be a situation in which God wants to use you to help one of the Christians you know. And if so, be available for Him to use you.

But there is another challenge in these verses. David was one of the most impressive kings Israel ever had. It’s said of him that he was a man after God’s own heart. But David is often used in the Bible as a picture of an even greater king, the Lord Jesus. When we see the stories about David in the Old Testament, they are certainly fascinating historical records. But they are also meant to point us towards Someone even greater than David – our Lord Jesus. Saul was rejecting God’s chosen king – David. In one sense that’s historical fact that has no real application for us today. But in another, it’s a reminder and a warning to us not to make the same mistake and reject God’s greater King – the Lord Jesus Christ. Saul was warned three times in chapter 19 to give him opportunity to stop his rejection of God’s king. But he ignored each one. Don’t make the same mistake today. Don’t reject the Lord Jesus.

There’s an interesting expression in verse 4 of 1 Samuel 19. It says, “Thus Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father.” Jonathan was very bold. He was prepared to go against his father in defence of David – God’s chosen king. He must have been very brave. Next week we’ll see his brave loyalty tested again in chapter 20. But I like the phrase, “Jonathan spoke well of David.” If you’re listening today and you’re a Christian, you have Someone greater than David to speak about to a world that largely rejects the Lord Jesus. Most of your friends and neighbours and work colleagues are probably a bit like king Saul in rejecting God’s king. But this week, you have an opportunity to speak well of Jesus. That might require bravery. It might be to a family member. Or a friend. Or a work colleague. Whoever it is, may the Lord give you boldness to speak well of the Lord to those you come into contact with. Jonathan’s efforts with his father were ultimately unsuccessful. But perhaps the Lord might use you this week to lead someone you know to come to know the Lord? And wouldn’t that be a week well spent?!

So 1 Samuel 19 is a puzzling chapter, but it reminds us not to ignore warnings to change direction when we’re stuck in sin. And it’s a reminder not to reject God’s true chosen king, not ultimately David, but the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on 1 Samuel chapter 19, “Saul seeks to kill David”, talk T1345.

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