

TO KILL DAVID

1 Samuel 19:1-24

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 15, 2009

"He too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam (19:24).

Psalm 2 presents in poetic form the response of God's sovereign majesty to mankind's pathetic attempts to thwart his will. It begins with a bewildered expression regarding the vanity of man's rebellion against heaven:

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us" (Ps.
2:1-3)

God responds to this challenge in a way that does not show the slightest respect or give the least credit to man's raised fist:

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
The Lord holds them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
And terrify them in his fury, saying,
As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill (Ps. 2:4-6).

If there was ever a biblical example of God's mocking rebuke of man's pretension in sin and unbelief, it is that of Israel's king Saul. Mad though he might be, Saul possessed at his disposal all the power the world can offer. He was crazed by a jealous desire to kill David, his own faithful servant but also the anointed one of the Lord. Saul's hatred was ultimately directed against the gospel of God's grace, that

he might snuff out God's kingdom so as to preserve his own. In this way, Saul is the direct precursor to the Pharisees and other religious leaders in Jerusalem who later sought so madly to take the life of Jesus Christ, God's true anointed Messiah. Like them, Saul would learn just how able God is to preserve his Anointed One. And as David noted in Psalm 59, which is reputed to have been penned on this occasion, Saul would learn how easy it is for God to overthrow his enemies. "Make them totter by your power and bring them down, O Lord, our shield!" David prayed. "Let them be trapped in their pride... consume them in wrath; consume them till they are no more" (Ps. 59:11-13).

SAUL'S SIN THWARTED BY GOD'S WORD

Saul's downward spiraling rage against David shows the peril of an unrepentant heart. No doubt, the thought of repenting of his obviously evil disposition was repulsive to Saul, but how much trouble it would have spared him! Instead, as his mad plans failed he merely devised new schemes for destroying his righteous nemesis. So it was that "Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David" (1 Sam. 19:1).

This direct appeal was remarkably imprudent on Saul's part. He knew that Jonathan had sworn a covenant of loyalty and friendship to David and that his heart was knit to the younger hero. Moreover, Saul must have realized how greatly all Israel admired David's virtues and accomplishments. How could he expect his staff to enter a league to murder David? The answer is that those who are gripped by evil often imagine that others are as easily corrupted as themselves. The appeal to Jonathan was obvious, Saul would have reasoned, since David's popularity endangered Jonathan's ascent to the throne. Likewise, Saul's officials stood to lose their prestige in any regime change, and a man like Saul could only imagine that such a thought overrode all other considerations.

Jonathan's faithfulness to David was tested by Saul's advance, and such was his heart that he passed the test easily. For him, the grace of God at work in the life of David was far more compelling than any worldly advancement for himself. For this reason, "Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted much in David" (1 Sam. 19:1). As a result, Jonathan

immediately gave a warning to David, giving little thought to his own well-being and providing yet another example of true friendship: “Jonathan told David, ‘Saul my father seeks to kill you Therefore be on your guard in the morning. Stay in a secret place and hide yourself’” (1 Sam. 19:2). Meanwhile, Jonathan would seek to reason with his father, still hoping for a return to sanity in Saul.

With this in mind, Jonathan spoke to his father. His approach provides a positive example of how a child of God should respond with truth and grace to conspiracies of sin and unbelief with truth and grace. Jonathan’s address to his father was simultaneously courteous and bold, offering counsels of prudence together with direct appeals to the Word of God. His purpose was to press Saul with the evidence of David’s innocence, along with the sinful folly of his murderous plan.

We might classify Jonathan’s initial approach to Saul as an appeal to common grace. This term refers to the way that God works in the world in a common or preservative way, promoting virtue and truth so as to restrain evil for the sake of his gospel. Common grace does not directly save anyone, but by God’s good influence on human society it preserves those whom God will later save by special, saving grace through faith in Christ. Jonathan was relying on God’s common grace when he appealed to Saul’s better judgment: “Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, ‘Let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have brought good to you. For he took his life in his hand and he struck down the Philistine, and the LORD worked a great salvation for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced’” (1 Sam. 19:4-5). Under the influence of God’s moral order and faced with a general appeal to prudence, Saul’s evil was restrained, though not conquered.

Christians should likewise reason with the sinful world on the basis of common morality and the obvious blessings of right thinking. But it will also be necessary to face evil with direct appeal to the Word of God. Jonathan did this frankly, informing Saul that his proposals amounted to sin: “Let not the king sin,” he warned. “Why then will you sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?” (1 Sam. 19:5). The warning about “innocent blood” referred to

Deuteronomy 19:10, which curses the “guilt of bloodshed” for all who slay the innocent, and the curse of God in Deuteronomy 27:24-25 against “anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret” conspires “to shed innocent blood.” In our response to evil today, Christians should unveil the naked warnings of God in the Bible, seeking to thwart the plans of evil with divine rebuke.

God made this world and it continues under his providential rule even in sin, so Jonathan’s appeal had an initial success in turning Saul from his sinful intent. “Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan. Saul swore, ‘As the LORD lives, he shall not be put to death’” (1 Sam. 19:6). God preserves his gospel and his church today by similar means. Roger Ellsworth comments: “God primarily preserves his cause through his children testifying of the grace of God to a dark world. We can say of Christianity what Jonathan said of David: ‘It has done you good. Why should you do it harm?’”¹

SAUL’S SIN DISPLAYED IN GOD’S JUDGMENT

In response to Saul’s vow not to put his friend to death, David returned to the king’s service. “Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before. And there was war again. And David went out and fought with the Philistines and struck them with a great blow, so that they fled before him” (1 Sam. 19:7-8). Saul was thus richly rewarded for heeding the counsel of his son, as God continued to work salvation for Israel through the sword of David. Undoubtedly, however, this produced a renewed out-breaking of praise for the young hero, the result of which was the return of Saul’s mad jealousy.

Saul’s part in the story of David displays for us the corruption and torments of man in sin. Here, Saul shows the inconstancy of man in rebellion to God. Under the influence of his godly son, Saul had recently taken a vow not to seek David’s life. But when David returned from the war and, with a humility that is remarkable, resumed his ministry of music in Saul’s presence, he would surely have noticed a tell-tale sign of trouble: “[Saul] sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing the lyre” (1 Sam. 19:9).

¹ Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King* (Ross-Shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 50.

Consumed by fear of phantoms that existed only in his mind, “Saul’s fear and jealousy made him a torment to himself, so that he could not sit in his house without a javelin in his hand.”² David was no doubt ready when the inevitable happened: “And Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall” (1 Sam. 19:10).

How are we to explain Saul’s behavior? First, like all men apart from God’s rule, Saul was torn apart by competing powers. On the one hand, Saul plainly knew how wicked his behavior was, which is why all through these chapters of 1 Samuel he repents repeatedly. But on the other hand, Saul was under the influence of the mad passion of sin. Gordon Keddie writes, “Saul was a living a lie. That is why he could so easily make pious vows and contradict them almost in the same breath.” In this respect, Saul presents in concentrated form what must be true of everyone who is restrained by the knowledge of right and wrong but conquered by anger, lust, or other evils. “Without a saving change, a sinner is a mess. He hardly knows himself... And even though he knows that God will judge wickedness, he goes on doing it as if he had a death-wish and encourages others along the same fatal road.”³

If any man ever proved our need for the save grace of Jesus Christ, that man is king Saul. What was concentrated in him is true of every man apart from the saving power of Christ: we are unable to live up to our moral pretensions and are capable of sins that we would eagerly condemn in others and that must condemn us before God. This is why appeals to common grace and rational prudence ultimately fail in restraining sin: the power of sin so infects the mind that men and women are suicidally irrational in their pursuit of wealth, power, lust, or hatred.

But that was not the only problem with king Saul. The Bible is candid in speaking of God’s on-going judgment in the form of a tormenting spirit, which presumably was an angelic messenger who afflicted Saul’s mind. “A harmful spirit from the LORD came upon

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:301.

³ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 185.

Saul” (1 Sam. 19:9). The reality of such spiritual chastisement is shocking to those who see God as a doting grandfatherly gentleman in heaven. That view is false, for as the Bible tells us, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). Saul was a reprobate, whose heart had hardened against God, so that of all his problems in life chief among them was the fierce judgment of the Almighty. Not only would Saul’s divided nature not permit him to lead a wholesome, godly life, but God would not permit Saul to lead a wholesome, godly life.

Undoubtedly there was an interplay between Saul’s jealousy of David and the torments of the evil spirit, just as Paul warned us “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph. 4:26-27). Even apart from the kind of chastisement Saul received from God, there are enough evil influences in our world that we are well warned to guard our hearts and minds at all times, not permitting the growth of bitter seeds, lusts, or angers, which open us up to evils far beyond anything we imagined.

Saul’s sin not only *caused* God’s judgment, but Saul’s sin was to be *displayed* by God’s on-going judgment and chastisement. God continued to preserve his servant David – which is why Saul’s spear continued to miss the young hero even at short range – but God’s judgment of Saul revealed his apostasy before all Israel. Paul likewise writes of God giving over idolaters to their sins. Speaking of sinful men and women who will not acknowledge God or obey his commands, Paul says that God “gave them up to dishonorable passions... to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom. 1:24-28). When men, women, and societies have utterly turned from God, he unleashes his judgment upon them in the form of their passions unrestrained, displaying by his judgment the sin, folly, and torment of those who have turned from God and reaped godlessness in return.

David had had enough of Saul’s spears, so he fled the court for his home. But Saul sent his agents to watch David’s house and take his life in the morning. Word of this reached David’s wife, Michal, however, who was also Saul’s daughter, and through her loyalty God once again spared David’s life. In Psalm 59, David depicts them as “bloodthirsty men” (v. 2). “For behold, they lie in wait for my life;

fierce men stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord” (v. 3). Here, as elsewhere, David’s affliction foreshadows the irrational hatred of Israel’s religious leaders against Jesus Christ.

We see in David’s situation the two reactions of our world to Jesus, of whom David was a type. There are those with eyes to see him in his glory, just as Jonathan delighted in David through his faith in God. But others see Jesus only as a threat to their self-rule and especially to their sinful desires. This is how Saul looked upon David: God’s anointed was a continual threat to him, his righteous character an offense to Saul’s tortured soul. How do you respond to the biblical portrait of Jesus? Is he a threat to your self-rule and worldly desires? Or do you see in him the very desire of your heart, the summation of all that is good and the Savior who will lead you to your destiny in glory? There is no more important question in all of life.

God was committed to protecting his anointed servant, David, just as Jesus could not be taken by his enemies until the time appointed for his crucifixion. Here, God uses Saul’s own daughter, Michal, to save his nemesis, just as he earlier used Saul’s son, Jonathan. “Michal, David’s wife, told him, ‘If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed.’ So Michal let David down through the window, and he fled away and escaped” (1 Sam. 19:11-12).

Unlike Jonathan, Michal does not seem to be a true follower of the Lord. This will become evident later in David’s life, when she despises him for his enthusiastic worship of God when the ark of the covenant is brought into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:16). On this earlier occasion, Michal aided David’s escape – commending herself at least as a loyal wife – by means of an idol that she kept in her house:

Michal took an image and laid it on the bed and put a pillow of goats' hair at its head and covered it with the clothes. And when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, “He is sick.” Then Saul sent the messengers to see David, saying, “Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him.” And when the messengers came in, behold, the image was in the bed, with the pillow of goats' hair at its head (1 Sam. 19:13-16).

This idol was a “teraphim,” a life-sized object probably employed for false worship of the Lord, though perhaps for the worship of false

gods. It is hard to understand how such an object could be in David's house, except that he and his wife were at odds as to their fidelity to the Lord. This, we remember, was Saul's intention in offering her hand in marriage, hoping that she would "be a snare for him" (1 Sam. 18:21). This perhaps explains the lack of warmth revealed in this marriage from this time forward. Moreover, as Saul's daughter, Michal was caught in a tug-of-war that is revealed in her explanation to Saul when he discovered her duplicity in aiding David's escape. "Saul said to Michal, 'Why have you deceived me thus and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped?' And Michal answered Saul, 'He said to me, "Let me go. Why should I kill you?"'" (1 Sam. 19:17). This was a wholly unnecessary lie, in which Michal showed less concern for David's reputation than she had shown for his life. Walter Chantry wonders, "Is it possible that these conversations strained [David's and Michal's] relationship in ways that never healed?"⁴ David's sin of polygamy in years to come, inexcusable in itself, may have found a motivation in the poorly yoked relationship of his marriage to Saul's daughter.

SAUL'S SIN OVERCOME SO AS TO PRAISE GOD

Beleaguered by Saul's persistent hostility, David fled Gibeah altogether, running for his life to nearby Ramah, where Samuel the prophet still lived. If Psalm 59 was in fact written during this journey, it reveals that David's was not a panicked flight, but that his mind was composed through faith in the Lord. "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me" (Ps. 59:1). Whereas Michal told David that he was to be slain in the morning, David countered with faith in the Lord: "I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress" (Ps. 59:16). As often happens for God's people, the hatred of the world drove David into the arms of God, thus providing the greatest service to his faith. William Blaikie comments: "In Samuel's company he would find congenial

⁴ Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War*, 49.

fellowship, and from Samuel's mature wisdom and devotion to God's law learn much that would be useful in after life."⁵

David's successful flight to Ramah reminds us that God protects his gospel and his cause, and that those who seek refuge in him will be kept safe. In fleeing to Samuel, David was casting himself on the Lord's mercy, since Samuel was the true leader of God's faithful in Israel. There he would witness a scene that was both intriguing and instructing regarding God's salvation of those who trust in him.

Before long, news came to Saul, "Behold, David is at Naioth in Ramah" (1 Sam. 19:19). Naioth may have been a local place or even a homestead where Samuel lived with the prophets. Hearing this, "Saul sent messengers to take David, and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as head over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied. When it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they also prophesied. And Saul sent messengers against the third time, and they also prophesied" (1 Sam. 19:20-21).

The description that the prophets, and then Saul's messengers, were "prophesying," seems to refer to an ecstatic state in which these men would speak with messages from God. The main point is that David was saved by the direct intervention of God's Spirit. Matthew Henry comments that God "showed how he can, when he pleases, strike an awe upon the worst of men, by the tokens of his presence in the assemblies of the faithful, and force them to acknowledge that God is with them of a truth."⁶ This reminds us that it is the worship of God that best protects God's people, especially when the Word of God is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul spoke of this to the early Christians, stating that when the prophetic word goes forth with power, even the observing unbeliever "will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:25). It is by the power of the Spirit through God's Word that his enemies are converted into believers and thus our friends. Even when the world is not converted, the Spirit's power through the Word and prayer in the sacred

⁵ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 312.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:303.

assembly of Christian worship instills a fear and awe that protects God's people from the tongues and even the swords of their foes.

We are reminded here of God seizing the lips of Balaam, the prophet hired to curse Israel in the days of the exodus, from whose mouth God would allow only blessings to fall on his people, and curses on his enemies (Num. 24:1-9). We are not told what prophesies were made by Saul's agents, but we can easily imagine that under the Spirit's control they like Balaam spoke great truths concerning God's protection of the righteous and his promises for the success of his Messiah and the gospel.

Finally, Saul himself came to Ramah seeking David. "And the Spirit of God came upon him also, and as he went he prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'" (1 Sam. 19:23-24). Evidently, under control of God's Spirit, Saul was entranced in such a way that he completely disarmed himself and disrobed from all the emblems of his office. Saul was thus humiliated by God as he threatened the life of God's anointed servant, and God overcame his enemy in such a way as to bring praise to his name. The proverbial saying that resulted, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" was not an expression of praise but of bewilderment in the erratic conduct of the godless ruler. Gordon Keddie writes, "God sovereignly intervened and manifested his power in such a way as to express his disapproval of Saul's intent towards David and to expose him to the self-destructive folly of his ways."⁷

SAFE IN THE FORTRESS

As we reflect on this remarkable chapter, we should first note both the mercy and the warning it presents to all who set themselves against the Lord and his Savior, Jesus Christ. First, we observe God's mercy to those who observed Saul, so that the king's willful unbelief would be readily seen for the crazed folly that it was. God was also showing mercy to Saul himself, placing him in

⁷ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 188.

circumstances that ought to have made plain to him the folly of his ways. This is how unbelievers should think about the disappointments in their lives and the failures of their character. Blaikie writes: “Oh, friends, if there be in you the faintest dissatisfaction with your past life, the faintest desire for a better, take advantage of the opportunity, and turn to God.”⁸ If you sense that God is thwarting the advancement of your sinful, selfish, or sensual ambitions, do not harden your heart but present it to God for deliverance from sin. When Balaam, the prophet hired to curse Israel, sought to go forward on his wicked errand, God sent an angel with a flaming sword to bar his way. You likewise should respond to God’s opposition with the words like those of Balaam: “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, it is evil in your sight, I will turn back” (Num. 22:26-34). Turn back from your sin and turn to God for forgiveness through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.

If you are determined to set your face against God, however, and to persist in your sinful resolutions, especially as you may seek to oppose God’s anointed Savior, Jesus Christ, and his people, then Saul’s plight warns you of coming doom. David sang in Psalm 59, “But you, O LORD, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision” (v. 8). In Psalm 2, David exulted of all who stand in unrighteous opposition to God and his people: “You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:9). How much better to repent and seek the grace that may be found by all in Jesus Christ. Psalm 2 thus concludes:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:10-12).

Those last words provide the comfort for God’s people revealed in this chapter. David sang in Psalm 59, “O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress. My God in his steadfast

⁸ Blaikie, *1 Samuel*, 316.

love will meet me; God will let me look in triumph on my enemies” (vv. 9-10). With God’s providential hand guiding us through dangers, and God’s Spirit empowering his people against the spiritual powers of darkness, believers are free to find all of our safety in the Word of God and through prayer. “If God is for us,” Paul reasoned, “who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31).

There is a royal castle of the Scottish kings at Stirling that stands on a rock, towering over the fertile lowlands of the Forth valley. Behind its high battlements, it withstood numerous sieges over eight hundred years and in 1314 it witnessed the victory of Bannockburn when Scotland’s kingdom was recovered. Within its walls rests the palace of James V, a serene and peaceful home with lovely gardens both within and without. Within this palace, safe behind the mighty walls, the king and queen could live in peace with the joy of God’s blessing on their hearts.⁹

So it is for the Christian, as David revealed through his experience of refuge with the prophets at Ramah. We are safe within the walls of God’s mighty protective Spirit, freed not only to rejoice in his goodness to us but also to live in peace and blessing towards even those who hate us. In such bliss, we are called by God to do as Samuel and the prophets: to speak forth the Word of God with great joy, in the power of the Spirit through our faith. We are freed to pray for even those who hate us, that by the Spirit’s power in the gospel they may be made our friends and allies. For it was while the prophets of Ramah were worshiping and exulting in God’s Word that the Spirit seized their foes. May God likewise reveal his glory in our presence and his power through our witness of Christ and his gospel, that by the divine weapon of the Spirit-inspired Word we may “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

⁹ Cited from Gordon Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom*, 189