

# **The Life of David**

## **David in Saul's Service**

*1 Samuel 16:14-23*

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## David in Saul's Service

### Scripture

Last week we begin a sermon series on “The Life of David.”

David's story begins in 1 Samuel 16, where we read that God sent Samuel to anoint David as the next king of Israel (16:1-13). When Samuel anointed David as the next king over Israel, David was just a young boy, perhaps as young as twelve years old. After the anointing, David went back to the fields to take care of the sheep, and Samuel returned to his home in Ramah. Meanwhile, King Saul was at his house in Gibeah.

Some time after this, we pick up the narrative in 1 Samuel 16:14 and learn how David entered into Saul's service.

Let's read about David in Saul's service in 1 Samuel 16:14-23:

**<sup>14</sup> Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. <sup>15</sup> And Saul's servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. <sup>16</sup> 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 harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” <sup>17</sup> So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” <sup>18</sup> 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.” <sup>19</sup> Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” <sup>20</sup> And**

Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul.

<sup>21</sup> And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer.

<sup>22</sup> And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." <sup>23</sup> And whenever the harmful 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 harmful spirit departed from him. (1 Samuel 16:14-23)

## Introduction

In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry has his character Jayber talk about the quiet work of God's guidance in our lives:

Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I deserved. Often my faintest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led—make of that what you will.<sup>1</sup>

Young David was watching his father Jesse's sheep one quiet day. Perhaps he was playing his harp when a messenger, sent by his father, summoned him to the sacrifice where the great prophet—and former judge of Israel—Samuel wanted to see him. Undoubtedly curious as to why the prophet wanted to see him, David dutifully went to join his father Jesse, his

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint, 2001), 133.

seven brothers, and the elders of Bethlehem. Imagine David's surprise when "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers" (16:13a). David quickly learned that Samuel had been sent by the Lord to provide for himself a king from among Jesse's sons (16:1). Although no-one knew it then, "this was the first of three anointings for David as king of Israel. The other two anointings occurred when he became king at Hebron over part (the tribe of Judah) of Israel (2 Samuel 2:4) and when he became king over all of Israel (2 Samuel 5:3) seven years later."<sup>2</sup>

The Lord had rejected Saul as king over Israel because of Saul's disobedience (15:23). The Lord then sent Samuel to anoint David as the next king over Israel, although David would not take up the office of king for many years. Samuel obeyed the Lord, and the Lord showed Samuel that David was the one upon whom he had set his heart to be his king over a kingdom that would last forever (13:13-14). No sooner had Samuel anointed young David as the next king over Israel in this semi-private ceremony when "the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward" (16:13b).

This is the context for our lesson today.

## Lesson

David in Saul's service in 1 Samuel 16:14-23 shows us how the Lord prepared David for his future service.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Saul's Troubled Soul (16:14)
2. Saul's Servants' Solution (16:15-18)
3. Saul's Faithful Servant (16:19-23)

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<sup>2</sup> John G. Butler, *David: The King of Israel*, vol. Number Fifteen, Bible Biography Series (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 1998), 15.

## I. Saul's Troubled Soul (16:14)

First, let's look at Saul's troubled soul.

God's rejection of Saul as king over Israel had two immediate results.

### A. *The Spirit of the Lord Departed from Saul (16:14a)*

The first result of God's rejection of Saul as king over Israel is that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.

First Samuel 16:14a says, **“Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.”** This statement about Saul is in contrast to the statement about David in the previous verse where we read, “And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward” (16:13b). What is going on here?

When Samuel anointed Saul as king over Israel, we read that “the Spirit of God rushed upon him” (10:10). This does not mean that Saul was regenerated into a saving faith. Rather, it meant that the Spirit of God enabled him to accomplish the calling that God had placed upon his life. However, when Saul rejected the word of the Lord (15:23), he was rejected by the Lord, and **the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul**. The Lord no longer enabled Saul to accomplish the calling he had placed upon his life. Instead, “the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David” (16:13b) so that he would be enabled to accomplish the calling that God had now placed upon his life.

Now, some may wonder if Saul lost his salvation because the Spirit of the Lord departed from him. We know that every believer is baptized into the Holy Spirit at the moment of regeneration. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer from the moment of the new birth (1 Corinthians 6:19), and the Holy

Spirit never departs from believers. So, what happened to Saul? The answer is that Saul lived before the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Prior to that day, the Spirit was only given to certain people—“rushed upon,” in the words of our text—on a temporary basis.

Samson is an example of this. Michael Bentley writes that Samson “was a judge in Israel who had been appointed and empowered by God for the great task of leading the people into right ways. However, because of his own foolishness, there came a period in his life when the Spirit left him. He was then so far away from God that he was unaware that the Lord had left him (Judges 16:20).”<sup>3</sup>

So, the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.

B. *A Harmful Spirit from the Lord Tormented Saul (16:14b)*

The second result of God’s rejection of Saul as king over Israel is that a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented Saul.

First Samuel 16:14b says, “...and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him.” Some Bible versions say that “an *evil* spirit from the Lord tormented him.” What is going on here? Did the Lord send an “evil” spirit to torment Saul?

Commentators offer different solutions to this question. One group of commentators suggest that people in ancient times did not understand what modern psychology understands. Saul’s torment was some kind of psychological affliction, perhaps something like a bipolar disorder. Another group of commentators say that the Spirit’s departure from Saul opened him to demonic affliction. The difficulty with both of

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Bentley, *Face2Face with David: Encountering the Man after God’s Heart*, ed. Simon J. Robinson, vol. 1, Face2Face Series (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 15.

these solutions is that the text explicitly states that Saul's affliction was **“from the Lord.”**

So, how should we understand the text? Did the Lord send an “evil” spirit to torment Saul? Commentator Robert Bergen answers, “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.”<sup>4</sup> God was judging Saul for his repeated disobedience and unwillingness to repent by afflicting him with a harmful spirit—presumably an angel—that tormented him.

There is a lesson here: *not all affliction is psychological or demonic; sometimes it is caused by the Lord himself.* When I was a new pastor, I attended a week-long Evangelism Explosion clinic in Columbus, OH at a large Lutheran church. The pastor of the church shared his testimony about his conversion. He was a scholarship basketball player who played for a prestigious university. When he graduated from college, he still had a year of eligibility left to play basketball. So, he carried on with a master’s degree in Religion. He finished his degree, was ordained as a minister in the Lutheran church, and sent with a pile of money to pay for a brand-new church building and plant a church in Columbus. He had the building built and visited hundreds of homes in the neighborhood. I believe on opening day there were about 300 people in attendance at the worship service. However, over the coming months he experienced tremendous pain in his stomach. Visit after visit to doctors and emergency rooms provided no relief. After about a year he saw a new specialist. After an examination, some laboratory tests,

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<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 182.

and extensive questions, the doctor finally said to him, “My friend, there is nothing medically wrong with you. Your problem is guilt. You need to repent of your sin and trust in Jesus Christ.” Astonishingly, the pastor did so, and thirty or so years later he testified that he has never again had abdominal pain. Sometimes, the Lord torments us with a harmful spirit in order to cause us to turn to him in repentance.

That, however, was not the solution offered by Saul’s servants.

## II. Saul’s Servants’ Solution (16:15-18)

Second, let’s note Saul’s servants’ solution.

In verse 15 we read that **Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you.”** Interestingly, they recognized the source of Saul’s problem; it was **from God**. However, sadly, their solution was off the mark. They said, **“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 harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well”** (16:16). Saul’s problem was his sin. Therefore, the only correct solution to his problem was repentance. To have someone play soothing music would only at best address his felt needs, but would not address his real and true need: forgiveness of sin.

The lesson for us is this: *superficial solutions will not address spiritual problems*. We live in a fallen world, and things are constantly going wrong. We have all kinds of needs, and we usually want to meet them with things that makes sense to us. However, let us realize that a felt need may simply be pointing to the fact that a real spiritual need must be addressed.

**So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man**



**who can play well and bring him to me” (16:17).** Saul did not realize what his real problem was, and so he concurred with his servants. Then, **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” (16:18).** We don’t know how the young man knew about David. But apparently, he knew him well enough to give him a sterling character reference: a man **“who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and, most importantly, the Lord is with him.”**

### **III. Saul’s Faithful Servant (16:19-23)**

And third, let’s observe Saul’s faithful servant.

Apparently, pleased with his servants’ solution, **Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep” (16:19).** Jesse agreed to send David to go and serve Saul, **and David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer (16:20).** David found favor in Saul’s sight, and served him faithfully. **And whenever the harmful 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 harmful spirit departed from him (16:23).** David’s ministry to Saul helped him so that he was able to carry out his functions as the king of Israel, albeit in his own strength.

In God’s providence, David was now getting a front-row seat observing Saul as king over Israel. He saw how Saul governed his people. Undoubtedly, there were things that David thought were helpful, and there were things that David thought

were not helpful. He was gaining experience by observing Saul's administration of his royal responsibilities that would help him in the coming years.

Moreover, David must also have observed what God did to a person when he sinned and did not repent. Saul's unrepentant heart must have made a great impression on young David. Commentator Richard Phillips writes:

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, with 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" (32:5).<sup>5</sup>

So, in the providence of God, David became Saul's faithful servant. He was able to observe first-hand the administration of kingship. And he was also able to see the necessity of repenting of sin before God.

But perhaps the most significant thing to note about David is stated at the end of verse 18, where the author says, "And the Lord is with him." The Lord called David to be king. The Lord gave David his Spirit. And the Lord was with David.

David points us to his greater Son, Jesus Christ. The Lord sent Jesus to be king. The Lord gave Jesus his Spirit. And the Lord was with Jesus. In fact, Jesus made this plain in his very first sermon, when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

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<sup>5</sup> Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 274–275.

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18a). As Phillips writes, “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, since the Father was providing his Son to be the Savior of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed David in Saul’s service in 1 Samuel 16:14-23, we should be thankful that the Lord is with us too.

The Lord is with those of us who have been called by him, and who have been given his Spirit. And because of Jesus’ victory over death and sin and hell, he is able to give the Spirit to all the elect as well.

If you are not yet a Christian, I invite you to cry out to God. Repent of your sin. Put your trust in Jesus. Believe that God loves you. Trust that he has called you to be his own child. You will never get anywhere spiritually until you get right with God. That was Saul’s problem.

And if you are a Christian, continue to trust in Jesus. Continue to repent of your sin. Continue to believe that your heavenly Father loves you and delights to pour out his Spirit upon you. Continue to believe that the Lord is with you so that you may know his refreshing grace in your life and share it with others. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 276.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
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*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

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