

1 Samuel 18:1-19:24

Introduction

When Saul first met David, he loved him. That's what we were told in chapter 16.

And after all the action of chapter 17, when David walked onto the battlefield with just a sling and five smooth stones and defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, Saul had every reason to love him more.

We all love an underdog who wins. If you've been watching the latest series of *Gladiators*, then you might have found yourself cheering on the contestants as they go up against the pros.

Very helpfully, one of the Gladiators is even called Giant.

Here he is.

He's six foot five and rippling with muscles. But that's nothing compared to Goliath, who stands at something like nine foot nine. Compared to Goliath, even Giant looks small.

So, when David topples Goliath and saves Israel from the Philistines, it's no surprise that people love him.

In fact, by the end of chapter 18, everyone in all Israel loves him. With one exception. There's one person who doesn't. And that's Saul. At one time he too loved David. But by the end of the chapter 19, his attitude couldn't be more different.

David is God's anointed king.

Saul is God's rejected king.

And these chapters contain two contrasting trajectories. David's is upwards. Saul's is downwards.

So, let's look at it together, and I've put as our first heading: kindred spirits.

Kindred spirits

Chapter 18 picks up the action after the battle. And it begins with these words: **After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan become one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.**

You might remember that Jonathan is Saul's son. We met him properly in chapter 14. And we found him to be a man of courageous faith, who is zealous for God's glory.

If you remember, while his father was sitting under a Pomegranate tree doing nothing, Jonathan snuck away to go and attack God's enemies, the Philistines. He trusted God. And accompanied only by his armour-bearer, he climbed up the cliff called 'Slippery', attacked the Philistine outpost, and sent the Philistines running.

It was a great story.

And now, as David finishes speaking with Saul, Jonathan recognises a kindred spirit.

Here is someone with courageous faith like his... who trusts God and is passionate about God's glory, like him... who has just risked his life, as he did, and defeated the Philistine champion.

And Jonathan loves what he sees. They are kindred spirits.

So, they make a covenant together.

Those who find some suggestion of a homosexual attraction in the text are reading into it something that simply isn't here. This is a bond of allegiance between two friends who are both zealous for God.

And then we're told that Jonathan takes off his robe and gives it to David... **along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.**

Those items are all symbols of Jonathan's status as the crown prince of Israel and of his future rule as king. When we read chapter 14, we saw what a fine king he would make. Except, he will never be king. Because his father Saul has been rejected by God.

And, here, it could be that Jonathan is acknowledging that *David* is the future king, who will one day take his place.

If that's the case, then he's doing what we must all do, which is to acknowledge the one whom God has appointed to rule over *us*. For us, that's not David but *the* King whom God has appointed as ruler of all. David's great descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must all, if you like, take off the robes of self-rule and give our allegiance to him as God's King, who rules over us for our good and blessing.

But what follows is primarily a picture of what happens when we refuse to acknowledge God's anointed king. It's a sad depiction of Saul's decline. And I've called our next heading: Saul's unravelling.

Saul's unravelling

The rest of chapter 18 outlines two very different trajectories.

It begins with an introduction to David's future successes.

Verse 5 says.

Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well.

But then attention quickly switches to Saul's jealousy and his rapid decline.

First, we're told that as the men return home after the routing of the Philistines, the women come out to greet them. Their victory is already being celebrated in song.

Verse 7.

As they danced, they sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.'

It's a typical style of Hebrew poetry that uses couplets and exaggeration. There was probably no intention to belittle Saul. The women are merely saying that, between them, Saul and David have killed a lot of people. Yet Saul interprets it as a slight. He feels angry and threatened. He's jealous.

We can probably all relate to that. It can be difficult *not* to feel jealous when someone younger... better looking... more popular... more successful... comes along. Yet the Bible is full of warnings about where jealousy can lead if we don't guard ourselves against it. And for Saul, it stands at the start of his decline.

The next day, things get worse.

Once more, as before, a harmful spirit from God comes upon him. And his paranoia grows. We're told that he was prophesying in his house. It's not clear what that means, exactly. It probably implies that he was changed into some kind of frantic state. Which is why David was playing the lyre.

Previously, Saul had liked that. It had soothed him. But not this time. This time he's anything but soothed. In fact, he hurls a spear at David to try to kill him... not once but twice. But David gets away.

Then, in verse 12, we're told that **Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had departed from Saul.**

Jealousy has given way to fear.

But Saul thinks he has a solution. He sends David away to lead his armies. Clearly, he hopes that David will be killed in battle.

But it doesn't work.

In verse 14 we're told: **In everything [David] did he had great success, because the LORD was with him. When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and all Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns.**

Saul switches tactic.

He had promised his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever killed Goliath. So, he offers the hand of Merab, his oldest daughter. But he does so on the understanding that David continues to fight in battle. And this time, in verse 17, we're told his motive explicitly. He hopes that the longer he can keep David on the battlefield, the greater the chances will be of David getting killed.

David accepts the proposal in an appropriately deferential way. But then, when the time comes for the marriage to go ahead, Saul gives his daughter to someone else.

Then we're told that another of Saul's daughters, Michal, is in love with David. In his increasing desperation, Saul tries again. He hopes that *this* daughter might lead to David's downfall.

Again, David accepts the proposal of marriage in an appropriately deferential way. But this time Saul sets a bride price of 100 dead Philistines. And again, we're told his motive. His plan is for David to be killed in battle.

Once again, Saul's plan fails. David goes and kills not 100 but 200 Philistines. And the marriage goes ahead.

And then we're told, in verse 28: **When Saul realised that the LORD was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy for the rest of his days.**

Meanwhile, we're told that: **The Philistine commanders continued to go out to battle, and as often as they did, David met with more success than the rest of Saul's officers, and his name became well known.**

Notice what's happening.

David's popularity is rising. It's clear to all that the Lord is with him. Everything he does is successful. Everyone loves him. His name is well known.

But Saul has made David his enemy. He has set himself against God's anointed king, his Christ. And the result is awful. His jealousy has turned to paranoia. His paranoia to fear. His fear to deep fear. And as his emotional state unravels, he is becoming increasingly isolated from God and from those around him.

And that will get worse and worse in the chapters that follow.

By setting himself against God's anointed king, David, he's setting himself against God's plan and purpose. And the result is that he's in a kind of living hell.

God wants the best for people. That's found in aligning ourselves with him and his king, Jesus Christ. For us, to align ourselves with God and his purposes in Christ is to choose life and all the blessings of belonging to God forever. But to set ourselves against God, is to isolate ourselves from him and, ultimately, from others.

Saul's experience here is a picture of what hell will be like.

It's a place of isolation and torment.

To be in hell is to be separated from the love of God.

Now, in the present, God's kindness surrounds us every day in the good things we enjoy. A walk along the seafront. A nice meal out. The companionship of a cat or dog. A good book. Our favourite film. The sight and smell of flowers in the summer. We take them for granted. But in hell, there will be no comforts. No pleasures. No enjoyment. People will be separated forever from the goodness of God.

We love company. We love having friends and family around us. A mother or father. A brother or sister. A husband or wife. A son or daughter. They are God's good gifts to us. But in hell, there will be no friendship. No companionship. No camaraderie. Everyone who is there will feel utterly alone.

And in hell the good inside each of us will be stripped away. Jesus described the torment of hell as a fire that never goes out. He described it as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's a place where people will unravel completely under the weight of their own guilt and self-loathing. It's a place without solace or relief.

That's what we catch a glimpse of in Saul as he becomes increasingly isolated and tormented.

And that isolation continues as we read on.

I've called our next heading: David's protection.

David's protection

Up to this point, Saul has kept his plans to kill David to himself. But now, he goes public.

Verse 1.

Saul told his son Jonathan and all the attendants to kill David.

In what follows, God protects David three times, through different means.

First, through Saul's son, Jonathan.

Jonathan speaks to his father and appeals to him not to kill an innocent man. He points out that David has not wronged Saul in any way. And he reminds his father how pleased he had been when David had risked his life to defeat Goliath and win a great victory for all Israel.

In verse 5, he pleads with his father: **'Why then would you do wrong to an innocent man like David by killing him for no reason?'**

And Saul relents. David's life is spared.

Then, God protects David a second time, through Saul's daughter, Michal.

Saul sends men to David's house to kill him. We had it read for us. You can read David's account of it in Psalm 59, which speaks of David's confidence in God to save him. And that's what God does, through Michal.

She helps David to escape through a window. Then she covers for him by putting an idol in his bed, covering it with a garment and carefully placing some goat's hair at the top where his head should be. It's brilliant!

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't fool the men for long... but by the time the deception is discovered, David is long gone. He flees to Samuel at Ramah.

And when Saul sends men to find him, God saves him a third time.

When Saul's men arrive at Ramah, we're told that the Spirit of God comes upon them, and they start prophesying. That probably means that the Spirit overpowered them and put them into some kind of frenzied state.

Saul sends more men, and the same thing happens.

Eventually, Saul decides that if something needs doing, it's best to do it yourself, and he sets off to Ramah.

And the same thing happens to him too.

We're told, in verse 24: **He stripped off his garments, and he too prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay naked all that day and all that night. This is why people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'**

Saul has become a parody of himself.

When he was first made king, the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied. At that time people asked in wonder and amazement, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'

Here, they ask the same question, but this time in mockery and derision, as he lies naked on the floor, utterly humiliated.

Three times the Lord protects David and saves him from harm.

Now... we are not David.

God protected him in a particular way as his anointed king.

We cannot draw a direct line from his experience to ours.

The first line we should draw is from David to Jesus.

He too was an innocent man.

He too was hated and conspired against.

He too faced plots to kill him, even from birth, at the hands of king Herod.

And God protected him.

Even when his enemies had apparently succeeded in killing him, God raised him triumphant from the grave.

This passage should cause us to praise God for his protection of Jesus, even as a little baby, and for all that he has accomplished through him for our good and blessing.

And we *belong* to Jesus, through faith. So, this passage does contain much for us to ponder about God's protection of us, his people.

Firstly, notice how God protected David, even when he wasn't aware of the danger he faced.

Of course, having a spear thrown at you does suggest a certain amount of danger! But perhaps those around him wrote it off as another bad day. Saul was in another one of his bad moods. He was a bit unpredictable. Better be careful. Little did David know that Saul was plotting to kill him all along, sending him to the battlefield in the hope that he would die.

Yet while Saul kept his schemes to himself, God was still at work protecting David.

And who knows the ways in which God may have protected you and me from dangers we weren't even aware of.

Praise God for his care of us, even in ways we're not aware of.

Secondly, notice that God's protection comes in a variety of ways.

It came through the careful diplomacy and mediation of Jonathan. It came through the quick thinking of Michal and an escape through a window. It came through the direct intervention of the Spirit.

Praise God for all the ways he's able to protect *us* from danger, particularly from spiritual danger: through a passage in the Bible, a conversation with a friend, the words of a Christian song, a change in our circumstances. Praise him for all the ways he helps us to keep walking faithfully with Jesus.

Thirdly, notice that God's protection doesn't mean taking us out of our trials but keeping us standing in the midst of them.

The threats to David's life kept coming. One after another. A spear. A battlefield. A bunch of Saul's cronies. God didn't remove those threats. But he did keep David safe.

Sometimes the trials we go through seem overwhelming. They keep coming. One after another. But, somehow, God keeps us standing. And by his grace, our faith can even grow and deepen.

As we reflect on God's protection of David, it should move us to praise him for his care and protection of us, as we live each day trusting in him.

Conclusion

And as we read stories like this one, they should fill us with the same confidence that the apostle Paul expresses in his letter to the Philippians.

I am confident of this, he says: **...that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.** (Philippians 1:6)

God will finish what he has started.

David trusted God. And God protected him.

He delivered Jesus from every threat and danger, until his work was accomplished, at the cross.

And he will keep us safe, too, until he has accomplished his purpose for us and brought us safely home to himself in heaven. This story should encourage us to trust him. To commit ourselves wholeheartedly into his hands. And to give our allegiance fully to his king.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the confidence we have of your safe keeping of us until that day when we are with you forever. Please help us to keep faithfully with you, giving our allegiance wholly to your king, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.