

5. God behind the scenes

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to turn to our reading, and once again we are in 1 Samuel, we're on page 254. We're in this long section of David's story where he is being harrowed, harried, and treated like a fugitive as he flees from Saul and those who pursue him. Now once again it's quite a long reading, so we'll do it in two parts. We'll read the first part, and we'll sing and then read the second part.

We're going to read from 1 Samuel 22, verse 6, and then we're going to read 1 Samuel 23, 1-14. So let's hear the word of God then. 1 Samuel 22, verse 6. Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him.

Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, Hear now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in wait as at this day. Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul. I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech, the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the Lord for him and gave provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath, the Philistine. Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech, the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house. The priests were at Nob, and all of them came to the king.

[2 : 04] And Saul said, Hear now, son of Ahitub. And he answered, Hear now, my Lord. And Saul said to him, Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword, and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me to lie in wait as at this day?

And Ahimelech answered the king, And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house?

Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No, let not the king impute anything to his servant, or to all the house of my father. For your servants know nothing of all this, much or little.

And the king said, You shall surely die, Ahimelech, and all your father's house.

And the king said to the guards who stood about him, Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David. And they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me.

But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the Lord. Then the king said to Doeg, You turn and strike the priests. And Doeg, the Edomite, turned and struck down the priests. And he killed on that day 85 persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword, both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey, and sheep, he put to the sword. But one of the sons of Ahimelech, the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. And David said to Abiathar, I knew on that day, when Doeg, the Edomite, was there, that he would surely tell Saul, I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house. Stay with me, do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safe keeping. Amen. Now they told David, Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors.

Therefore David inquired of the Lord,

[4 : 32] Shall I go and attack these Philistines? And the Lord said to David, Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah. But David's men said to him, Behold, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines? Then David inquired of the Lord again. And the Lord answered him, Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand. And David and his men went up to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought

away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah. When Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an effort in his hand. Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, God has given him into my hand, for he had shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars. And Saul summoned all the people to war to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men. David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar, the priest, bring the effort here. Then said David, O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, please tell your servant. The Lord said, he will come down. Then David said, will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the Lord said, they will surrender you. Then David and his men, who were about 600, arose and departed from Keilah. And they went wherever they could go.

When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day.

But God did not give him into his hand. Amen. That is the word of God. And may he bless it to our hearts. Now, if we turn to our Bibles again, please, on page 245. And we'll have a moment of prayer.

Amen. And God, our Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us.

That you will open your word to our hearts and our minds. That you will open our hearts and minds to your word. This we ask in the name of the living word, Christ Jesus himself. Amen.

[7 : 40] In the year 1961, I know that many of you weren't around at that time, but in the year 1961, one of the great news items, I think it was about April of that year, was the astonishing news at the time that a manned spacecraft had been sent into the void.

For the first time, a man called Yuri Gagarin, a Russian, had been put into space. And he made the voyage and returned safely.

Now, shortly after that, one of his acquaintances in the Communist Party of what was then the Soviet Union said this. Gagarin traveled through space and came back to Earth.

And in all his traveling, he did not see God. Now, C.S. Lewis, who was still alive at that time, made the shrewd comment, Why would he see God? We're in space already.

After all, we go a year-long journey in space every 12 months. And he made another comment, which delighted me. C.S. Lewis said, that's rather like going to Stratford-on-Avon and saying you never saw Shakespeare.

[8 : 54] Because if you know and love Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare is everywhere. But that is how many people read the Bible, particularly Old Testament.

I read the story of David. I read about the priests at Nob. I read about Keilah. I read about all these wanderings.

And in all my reading, I did not find God. Or at least, if his name was mentioned, he seemed to be inactive. He didn't seem to be doing very much.

And at first sight, that is true. As you read this story, it's a story in dark colors. There's a bloodbath. A whole town destroyed. And of course, this is sadly true to life. It's very realistic. Violence, intimidation is almost endemic in human nature.

[9 : 50] We've seen plenty of that in the recent riots. And we know that in human nature, there is this desire to use force, to use intimidation. And that's obviously what appears on the front of the stage here.

Violence, intimidation, and apparently God unable to intervene. Now, how are we going to get our bearings in this? Remember, there's no chapters in the original.

This is why sometimes we've been reading parts of chapters rather than reading chapter by chapter. But very clearly, if you look at the beginning and the end of the chapter we read, chapter 22, verse 6, Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him, he was sitting with a spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him.

In other words, this appears as going to be a story dominated by Saul, by the power of Saul, by the influence of Saul, and by Saul's increasingly paranoid desire to get rid of David.

Look at the last verse we read, 23, verse 14. David remained in the strongholds, and Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

[11:06] These are like the bookends of the story. The power of Saul and the protection of God. That's really what this instance is about, the power of Saul and the protection of God.

As I've kept on saying, this is not David's story, this is God's story. We simply read it as David's story. It's an interesting story, probably most exciting in the whole of Scripture, but yet it's remote from us, like looking at old paintings, like looking at old photographs of a decade or even more so a century ago, and saying we've moved on.

This is God's story. And the question asked here is, is God in control? His name's mentioned, but is he able to handle the situation?

I want us to look at this collection of stories in that light. I'm calling this sermon, God Behind the Scenes. Remember we sang at the beginning from Psalm 50, God is silent, so men say.

That's what this story is about, God behind the scenes. Now when you're studying narrative, of course, it's not like the letter to the Romans. We've not got therefore, therefore, therefore, with a series of points following one another.

[12:19] What we've got in this particular story is two powerful streams flowing. That's how I want to look at it today. Really the two points I mentioned at the beginning.

The first thing I want to look at is the apparent power of Saul. If you're reading this story, it looks as if Saul is in control. David escapes, certainly.

Sooner or later, Saul is going to catch up with him. That's the first thing, the apparent power of Saul. Look again at 22, verse 6. Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the Tamarisk tree, on the height, with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were gathered about him.

Immediately, that builds up a picture, doesn't it? Sitting on the height. Not just a physical elevation, but he's up there. He's the number one. He's surrounded by his entourage, and he has a spear, a violent weapon, in his hand.

And he is intimidating. And so often, when faced with the massed ranks of unbelief of the powerful, we can be intimidated as well.

[13:29] Our hearts can fail us for fear when we look out at the world. The forces of the new atheism, Dawkins et al., who attack the gospel with such powerful weapons, and apparently are not silenced.

Hearts failing for fear. The power of the state in countries where our brothers and sisters suffer from physical persecution. Notice as well, Saul's going to work with bribes.

Here now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give out, this is verse 7, every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds?

In other words, Saul is not just using the bludgeon. Saul is using flattery and bribes. I'll give you lands. I'll give you honors. I'll give you rewards.

Now, some time ago, when we looked at the book of Revelation, we saw this is the way the devil has always operated. Remember, the devil summons up two beasts from the sea. One beast is the persecuting power of the state.

[14:33] That's the beast that comes from the sea. And then from the earth, he summons another beast, a fair-spoken beast of propaganda and of false teaching. The devil has worked like that from the beginning, and Saul is showing where his heartland is.

Saul is showing where his allegiance is by operating that way as well. He's paranoid. The son of Jesse can't even bring himself to name David. His attitude to David has gone beyond simple dislike and suspicion.

He hates him. And he wants to get rid of him. He senses conspiracy. And then another character, verse 9, whom we met the other week, then answered Doeg the Edomite, this sinister, villainous figure who is only too happy to be the informant.

And this, of course, leads to the summoning of the priest, the high priest, Ahimelech, whose honesty and openness is not enough for Saul. Ahimelech is a guileless man.

He doesn't try to cover up. He doesn't try to pretend. He simply tells it as it is. And the dreadful order is given. In verse 17, The king said to the guard, Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because there are hand also with David.

[15:50] They knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me. There's just two things there. First of all, the viciousness of this man Doeg, because not only does he strike down the 85 priests, but

verse 19, Nob, the city of the priests he put to the sword.

This is a man who indulges in massacre, a man who delights in violence. That's the first thing. But the second thing to notice is the cowardly connivance of Saul's servants.

They can't bring themselves to strike down the priests. But they are certainly not going to do anything to interfere with the man who does. All that evil needs to succeed is for good people to do nothing.

And so often you see that. So often it happens in the service of God as well. So often it happens that people sit silent.

Kind of experience. People sit silent and then tell you afterwards, Well, I really agreed with you. I really support what you're saying. They're not there. Not there when their help is needed.

[16:56] I often think that's why, at the end of Romans chapter 1, in that denunciation of sins, which includes violence, Paul says, at the end, that God condemns not only those who do these things, but those who take pleasure in those who do them.

Connivant standing by is being as guilty as those who perpetrate the violence. There's really no room for wimps in God's service.

Well, that doesn't mean God's servants have been macho and swaggering, but it does mean that God's servants have to be people who will stand up for the right and attack what is wrong.

Some will hate you. Some will love you. Some will flatter. Some will slight. Cease from man and look above you.

Trust in God and do the right, the old hymn says. That's absolutely true. Now, remember, I call this the apparent power of Saul.

[18:01] Well, what does apparent mean? Because it all seems to be going Saul's way. Saul has got rid of this priest and the others who offended him.

David is on the run. Why is it not all going Saul's way? There's clues in the story. Remember in narrative, often the narrator doesn't actually tell you things straight out as we have, for example, in the letters and the discourse parts of the Bible.

I have to pick it up. What has Saul done here? Saul has chosen Esau instead of Jacob. Doeg the Edomite, the descendant of Esau, whom God rejected, he's chosen, and placed himself among the enemies of God.

Followed what the letter of Jude calls the way of Cain. This is what Saul has done. Saul has placed himself on that fatal road that's leading him away from God and towards destruction.

Why do the nations rage and the people imagine a vain thing? And the other thing is this. This brutal and dreadful act carried out by Doeg, for which he was totally guilty and which was totally reprehensible, nevertheless fulfills God's word.

[19:25] Back in chapter 2, verse 31, a man of God, an unnamed prophet, had said to Eli, his house will be wiped out. Now, here's this happening, the house of Eli wiped out.

Now, notice that this is not anything but wickedness on the part of Doeg. There's no suggestion this action was right. But the point is, even the anger of people, even their viciousness, even their rebellion, ultimately is worked out in God's overall purpose to bring in his kingdom.

And the classic example of this is in Acts 2, verse 33. Jesus, says Peter, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Now, you see the two things there, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Utterly wicked. But overarching this is the great plan, the big story, Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

Even God's enemies unwittingly carry out God's will. But, although there's mystery here, the point is, Saul has placed himself deliberately and cynically on the losing side.

[20:49] When the kings of the earth rage against Yahweh and against his anointed king, their success rate is nil. That's why I say this is the apparent power of Saul.

even although God's servants appear to be defeated, in some cases killed. And Saul and Doeg seem to have the upper hand.

That's one stream that runs through the whole narrative and of course it's running right through up to chapter 2, verse 23, verse 14. Saul sought him every day but God did not give him into his hand. That leads on to the second stream. The apparent weakness but real strength of God. We've had the apparent power but actually weakness of Saul.

Now we have the apparent weakness of God but the real strength, the apparent weakness of God but his real strength. Remember in 1 Corinthians Paul says the weakness of God is stronger than men and the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

[21 : 55] Here is open war against the Lord's servants. Not for the first time. And you see, as I said, Saul places himself in an inglorious line which includes Pharaoh, Jezebel, Athaliah who at a later generation tried to destroy the Lord's anointed and then of course Herod himself.

Let's say, here is the beast from the sea that I mentioned. The beast who in Revelation 13 verse 7 makes an important point. He was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

This is being illustrated here in verse 10 of that chapter. Here is a call for endurance and the faith of the saints. So you see what's being said here.

The devil is apparently in control. He makes war on the saints and conquers them but he only does it because he's allowed in the overarching providence of God. But why does God not defend his servants?

I saw a production of Macbeth during the summer and in Macbeth when Macbeth has Macduff's children murdered and his wife his wife and children murdered and the terrible message is brought to Macduff at the English court he says why?

[23 : 19] Did heaven look on and would not take their part? That's the question that must have arisen here. Did heaven look on and would not take their part?

Now sometimes of course he does. Think of the two great stories in Daniel 3 where Daniel's friends were rescued from the blazing furnace Daniel himself from the lions but more often not more often in this great mystery God's servants do not escape from the flames and the lions and that is because the kingdom has not yet come and once again we get light on this in the book of Revelation this time in Revelation chapter 12 the devil we are told is thrown out of heaven and has come down in great anger for he knows that his time is short the devil given his death blow but the battle still rages the battle rages with Satan because in defeat he is even more dangerous because he knows he cannot win so that is why the weakness of God is only apparent it's not that God is not in control but for his gracious purposes his gracious providences he actually allows these things to happen and stands with his people when they do happen but there is also the real power of God and let's look at that first of all the first example of this is in chapter 22 verse 30 sorry not verse 30 chapter 22 verse yes verse 20 one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitha named Abiath escaped and fled after David it's an important principle the remnant those significant minorities through whom the Lord works these are saved to carry on that work it's not although Doeg seems to have wiped the slate clean he misses one person and that person is going to be so significant we think back to Exodus chapter 2 those the terrible story of those baby after baby being killed as they were thrown into the river Nile one baby was not killed one baby escaped and that baby was Moses and the huge significance he had in God's purposes and of course especially in Matthew 2 when God's holy one

God's anointed one escaped from the rage of Herod and from the kings of the earth the work of God goes on David now has a prophet and a priest we saw last week how the prophet Gad came to him now he has a priest as well these two great figures leadership spiritual leadership figures in the Old Testament he now has a prophet and he now has a priest and in the story of David himself I haven't actually said much about David so far which is rather important because this is not the story of David it's the story of God God gives David victory and that's the point of chapter 23 1-14 God gives David victory at still tackling the Philistines this is one of the things we've seen already that shows that David and not Saul is God's anointed king Saul was appointed and you read about this in the early chapter of 1 Samuel in 1 Samuel 8 the people said give us a king who will defeat our enemies who will go out with us in battle the thing that Saul had signally failed to do although his son

Jonathan David's great friend had been far more successful so although David is rejected he is still acting as anointed king you see how the story is developing God is preserving his anointed king still tackling the Philistines showing that the defeat of Goliath was no flash in the pan this is the one who will defeat our enemies the Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have the victory that's who he points to so God gives David victory and that victory of course can only be ours as we saw in the Goliath story because David has won it already thanks be to God who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ the second thing here is that God gives David guidance David inquired of the Lord now we're not told how he inquired of the Lord but almost certainly this was through the

prophet Gad who had been sent to his court to bring him the word of the Lord read as I say 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings over and over again the prophetic words coming at times of crisis and times of difficulty in the court of

[28 : 19] David there is Gad and later there is to be Nathan various prophets who speak to the various kings and who word when he did leads to victory and when not he did leads to disaster that's one way in which he was given guidance as I said before these little details you can easily miss are important as well verse 6 of chapter 23 when Abiath the son of Himalai had fled to David and Keilah he had come down with an effort in his hand now what's all this about why was it so important that Abiathar brings here one of the high priest's garments now you can read about this in Exodus 28 this is one of the garments given to the high priest probably a kind of cloak or a kind of waistcoat with pockets in it what were called the urim and thumim which were lots which were cast before the

Lord and this was a recognized way in Old Testament times before the scriptures were fulfilled of seeking guidance from the Lord and it's even used you remember by the apostles in Acts chapter 1 when they cast lots to decide on the successor to Judas recognized way of receiving revelation and the theological rationale of this is in Proverbs 16 verse 33 the lot falls where it wills but every decision is from the Lord that does not mean that when you're appointing elders you cast lots because this is not David's story this is God's story what it means is that the sovereign Lord in his wisdom can overrule something even as random as throwing a dice so it all works out according to his purpose so the priest is sent along with the prophet to give

David guidance the priest represents guidance as well as the prophet now we do not expect that kind of guidance we do not expect a prophet to come and tell us what to do and certainly we don't cast dice in order to make a decision what to do where to go and that sort of thing what job to take we are not David but we have David's God so what's being said here what's being said here is that God's people as they make their way through the tangled and difficult ways of this world have guidance as well and 2 Peter tells us what that guidance is we have the word of the apostles we have the word of the prophets shining like a light in a dark place until the day dawns and the day star arises and that doesn't mean of course that we open the bible at a random place and put our finger on it and a kind of magical guidance jumps out it means that as we study and read scripture as our mind becomes shaped by scripture in other words becomes more and more the mind of Christ in us that then God guides us now I don't mean of course that we can't get specific advice from people which helps we all can think of circumstances like that where someone totally unknown to themselves have said a word that turned out to be the right word the point is all these are to be guided now by the word of God the whole canon of scripture so we don't need to have the equivalent of God we have the scriptures and that of course is why here we so much emphasize the preaching of scripture because all true exposition of scripture has a prophetic thrust to it not because not because I or anyone else who stands here am prophets but because we have the prophetic scriptures and expound them we have we have the word of the prophets made more certain said Peter and we certainly don't need an effort we certainly don't need the ancient high priest garment which will which will with its lots in it which will show us the way because we don't need a bither we have someone greater we have a great high priest who has gone into heaven Jesus the son of God so you see what this story is saying to us the God who is behind the scenes is not inactive when the enemy rages and he is using all the the wiles all the attacks all the traps of that enemy to work out his own purposes and God still protects us God still gives us guidance he is behind the scenes but he is no unmoved mover as some modern theologians would have he is the God of the covenant he is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we are not David but we have David's God known to us in his greater son the one who has sent his spirit and given us his word to guard us to guide us and to keep us on the road to glory amen let's pray

[33 : 49] Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever in our time in this point in the history of your kingdom we rejoice that while we do not have we are not David we do have David's God and we know that that God will be with us with all future generations guarding guiding protecting until the Lord returns and for this we give our grateful thanks in his name amen Stephen way