



# DAVID PLAYS IN SAUL'S COURT

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 16:14-23  
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Growing up as a child, I always felt I was in the dark as far as my family history was concerned. My mother's silence, I would later learn, grew out of her pain at being orphaned at nine and the years of emotional abuse she suffered from her adoptive parents. As far as my father is concerned, well, he was just quiet. I was 12 before I even learned that he had a sister. I never met one of my mother's sisters until last November. Around that time, Aunt Marie, my father's sister, telephoned me and said that if I came to her 80th birthday party, and a family reunion in Salt Lake City, she had a gift for me. The gift turned out to be a Book of Remembrance of our family history, going all the way back to the 1500's!

I went to Salt Lake City for the family reunion and stayed with my mother's sister, Aunt Ruth. Following the birthday party, we sat down at her kitchen table and she began to tell me all the stories that made up the history of my mother's family. At one point she showed me a copy of the "Boston Globe" newspaper, dated April 16, 1922. On page 4 was a photograph of my mother playing cello and her two sisters playing piano. The headline read, "Mormons or Gentiles—Which?" Apparently, a custody battle was going on. A certain opera singer was trying to adopt the three orphan girls and move them from New England to Salt Lake City. The court case made headlines in the newspaper for days. The whole community was up in arms about the possibility of these young orphans being relocated to Salt Lake.

But one word from a little nine-year-old girl who was to become my mother settled the matter. Her mother (my grandmother) was a concert pianist. She had told her daughter, a child prodigy cellist, that if anything ever happened to her, she wanted her friend, the opera singer who was fighting for custody of the girls, to adopt them so that their gift for music would be enhanced. This little girl's word to the judge in the custody case determined her destiny. She didn't want to go to Utah, but she told the judge that it was her mother's wish that this woman adopt her and her sisters. To the outrage of all of New England, the little girls headed West to live in Utah. Years later, that girl would meet and marry the man who would become my father.

Later, when I thought about this story, two things struck me. I was amazed at the sovereignty of God displayed in orchestrating the events that resulted in the meeting of two people who were later to become my mother and father. It's hard to say this, but I'm glad my mother went through all that pain. If she hadn't, of course, I wouldn't be here today! The second thing that had an impact on me was the legacy of musicianship which I inherited from my family. To my regret, I failed to appreciate this until my later years. Now it is too late to do anything about it. My trip to Utah certainly accomplished one thing: I came home with a new sense of privilege at being rooted and grounded.

As a Christian, of course, my spiritual roots go far deeper than a mere five hundred years. It is sad to think that most Christians seem uninterested in their spiritual roots. My generation of Christians is as ignorant of its spiritual history as I

was of my family history. In fact, we may be the most ignorant generation of the past two thousand years. If we seem to lack a sense of identity, if our convictions and ethics fall short, I feel it is because we are ignorant of the stories that make us who we are.

It is my prayer that this series on the life of David will help us rediscover the stories of our spiritual heritage. As Christians, we have been grafted into a tree whose roots go back three thousand years. What do you think lies at the very heart of our spiritual roots? The answer may surprise you. Just as my own family's roots are deeply sunk in music and musicianship, the Christian's spiritual roots lie in music, in the psalms of David, the marvelous prayers that he set to music. David, our great forefather in the faith, was a poet and a musician whose musical legacy has shaped the spirituality of Jews and Christians throughout the generations. It is to our shame that we have neglected the Book of Psalms. We have failed to use it as an avenue of prayer to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. Today, then, we will recount the story of David the musician.

Our first study in the book of 1 Samuel opened with the prophet grieving over King Saul. But God intervened and spoke to the prophet, saying, "How long...will you grieve over Saul, while I have rejected him, from being king over Israel?...I have selected (lit. "seen") a king for myself." We learned that the cure for Samuel's grief was to *come* and *see* the beauty of the new king. God was educating him to learn to *see* as God *sees*; he would anoint a new king in Israel.

God found such a king for himself from the back country of Judea. The youthful David, a shepherd boy, had been rejected by his family. But in his rejection he had learned to pray and seek the face of God. It was this David, the youngest and most insignificant son of the family of Jesse, whom Samuel anointed as king. Following his anointing, the Spirit of God "rushed upon David from that day forward."

Today, we will see how God maneuvers his newly anointed servant from the wilderness of Judea into the royal court of the rival king. There he will begin to influence the people of Israel. In this passage we get our first glimpse of David in the role of musician.

Before we get into our text, to help us better understand these stories I will set out three simple clues to the art of storytelling.

## Three Clues to Storytelling

### (a) Stories are built on words

Here is the first clue: look for words that are repeated. This is the best way to discover the theme of a text. Our text this morning, for instance, is built around the word *spirit*. This word is used seven times in the text, six times as a noun and once as a verb (in verse 23, where it is translated as *refreshed*). The word *spirit* also frames the scene. The opening words in the scene are "Now the *Spirit* of the Lord..."; while the closing words are "...the evil *spirit*." The theme of the passage,

quite obviously, is built around God's Spirit and evil spirits.

### (b) Stories have a definite structure and movement

Here is the second clue: Stories and scenes have definite structure and movement. There is often a climactic center (called a *center-line*), upon which everything turns. Then the images turn back on themselves and are repeated. The story ends where it began, but something new has been injected.

### (c) Individual stories make up a larger drama

Biblical stories are not isolated, unrelated incidents designed to teach morality; rather, in the Canon of Scripture they make up the pieces that form the larger whole. Biblical narrative stories give rise to powerful emotions in the reader by evoking memories of past incidents in Israel's history. Sometimes, even a word or phrase can evoke memories of other stories. For example, last week we read the phrase, "he [Samuel] anointed him [David] *in the midst of his brothers*." This reminds us of the story of Joseph and his brothers, with its poignant theme of rejection. Bible stories often evoke memories of past events in Israel's history.

But they do more than that: *They foreshadow the future*. They become linked into a larger whole and are repeated again and again (scholars call this "type scenes"<sup>1</sup>). With new pathos, intensity and emotion, they begin building to the grand climax of the Jesus story. That is when Israel's stories are reenacted and made new in her Messiah. Take the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. Most of us are not aware of this, but this is the seventh time this story is recorded in Scripture. But in this instance, it is told differently. This time, Jesus makes everything new. In the Old Testament, Jacob met the beautiful virgin, Rachel, at a well, but in the New Testament, Jesus, the new Israelite, has a discussion with a five-times married Samaritan woman at a well. Think of the emotional impact on the Jews when they heard about that meeting.

The stories in 1 Samuel, by the way, find their climax in the gospel of Luke. Tom Wright, an Oxford scholar, points out that the book of Luke is structured around the story of Jesus "as the fulfillment, the completion, of the story of David and his kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

There is one other very important thing to remember: The story of David and the story of Jesus are not finished until they become your story. Let me illustrate. One day in 1989, I was sitting on a hillside in Romania, together with some Romanian brothers, hiding from the security forces. I opened my Bible and began reading Psalm 27. This psalm of David's hiding in a secret place from Saul and singing the praises of God in that place became Jesus' own story. Now it had become my story, too. I found myself moved to tears at how privileged I was that my story had coalesced with theirs. This is what makes the Bible stories so exciting. The whole Bible is meant to be read that way.

Now getting back to our story, we want to answer the question: How is God going to maneuver David, an unknown youth from the secluded Judean wilderness, to center-stage in the royal court of King Saul? Let's begin by reading the opening verses of our text, 1 Samuel 16.

## I. Evil Spirits and Insightful Servants (16:14-17)

Now the **Spirit** of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil **spirit** from the LORD terrorized him. Thus Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, an evil **spirit** from God is terrorizing you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you. Let them seek a **man** ("*man*," the key word of chapter 17) who is a skillful player on the harp;

And it shall come about when the evil **spirit** from God is on you, that he shall play with his hand, and you will be **well**." So Saul said to his servants, "**Provide** ("*see*") for me now a **man** who can play **well**, and bring him to me." (16:14-17, NASB)

Saul's disobedience leads the Spirit of God to depart from him, creating a moral vacuum in his soul. An evil spirit, sent from the Lord, enters the spiritual void, to "terrorize" Saul. The Hebrew is graphic. It means "to fall upon, overwhelm, to be overtaken by sudden terror." The symptoms could be described as those of a manic-depressive. One moment the king was driven by insane rage, the next, he had fallen into dark depression.

You may find troubling the notion that it was the Lord who sent the evil spirit on Saul. Clearly, that is what the text says. As a matter of fact, on four different occasions the narrator declares that this evil spirit was from the Lord (14,15,16,23). Other texts confirm this (Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 19:9). We can take great comfort, however, from the obvious lesson here, and that is that evil spirits cannot operate on their own; they must operate under the authority of the Sovereign God. Saul is given over to an evil spirit because of his refusal to submit to the rule of God. Disobedience is a serious offense. In fact, according to Samuel, to disobey a direct commandment from God is as the sin of divination (15:23). How ironic to think that Saul, the disobedient king, finally resorts to divination because the Lord will no longer speak to him. If the king refuses to destroy God's enemies, then God's enemies will destroy him.

In the New Testament, we learn Jesus was given the power to rule over spirits. He empowered the apostles, and the apostles in turn empowered the church to do this. (When the church in Corinth failed to discipline a man who was committing incest, Paul delivered him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, 1 Cor. 5:5.) The lesson is clear: Disobedience is not to be taken lightly.

In this story, it is the servants who discern Saul's problem and it is they who propose the solution. How sad. Having turned his back on the Lord, Saul seldom sees anything anymore. The servants suggest that a harpist be brought to Saul's court. The skill of the harpist, they say, will soothe the king whenever the evil spirit from God comes upon him — and "you will be *well*," they promise (there is another key word in the text).

Saul responds by saying, "Provide (*see*) for me now such a man." These are the exact words that God used in chapter 16. God has so skillfully orchestrated the situation that he creates in Saul the need for the man he has already "selected (seen) for himself" (16:1). What are the instruments that God uses to get his servant to where he wants him? The answer is, evil spirits, and insightful, unnamed servants. Oh! the majesty of God!

This brings us now to verse 18, the center-line of the text (the verse also has its own center-line);

## II. David Identified (16:18)

Then one of the young men answered and said,  
"Behold, I have **seen** a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite  
who is a skillful musician,  
a mighty man of valor, a warrior,  
one prudent in speech,  
and a handsome man;  
**and** the LORD is with him."

One unnamed servant steps forward and says he has *seen* just such a man, one son of Jesse. This is the center-line of the

text. Notice that the focus is on the credentials of the son of Jesse. The point is, David is so gifted that no opposition is possible! The servant lists David's qualities in coordinating pairs, moving from the outside of the list to the center. First, "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite" is linked with the last quality, "a handsome man" (literally, a "man of shape," meaning "well built." David is articulate and artistic — "prudent in speech and a skillful musician."

David had a marvelous gift to write and sing praises and prayers. He not only composed music for worship (seventy-three of his hymns are found in the Psalter), but he invented the musical instruments that accompanied them (Amos 6:5).

The center-point, however, is his strength. The servant says, "a mighty warrior and a man of war." David was so strong his arms could "bend a bow of bronze" (2 Sam 22:35). What a combination! A Renaissance man, musical and rugged!

David Roper describes him in these words:

David had incredible presence — an intangible elitism and magnetism that attracted others. He cast a spell on everyone. Saul loved him. Jonathan loved him. Abigail loved him. Women made up songs about him. Men flocked to him and were willing to die for him. Achish the Philistine described him as an "angel of the Lord." Ittai the Gittite would not leave his side in exile. What gave him that power over others? The bottom line, as the young courtier put it, was that "the Lord is with him."

When the Massoretic scribes inserted musical notations to chant the Hebrew Bible, they divided every verse into two portions (not necessarily of equal length). In verse 18, the half-way point comes after the word "handsome man," indicating that all the previous attributes are the result of what follows, "the LORD is with him." And David knew this, as you will see when you read his psalms.

"For by Thee I can run upon a troop;  
By my God I can leap over a wall.  
God is my strong fortress;  
And He sets free the blameless in His way.  
He makes my feet like hinds' feet,  
And sets me on my high places.  
He trains my hands for battle.  
So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze."  
(2 Sam 22:30, 33-35)

So we have arrived at the center-line of this scene, with David in full view and clearly identified.

Next, he is sent for.

### III. David Sent For (16:19-22)

So Saul **sent** messengers to Jesse, and said, "**Send** me your son David who is with the flock." And Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread and a jug of wine, and one young goat, and **sent** them to Saul by the hand of David his son. Then David came to Saul, and stood before him, and Saul loved him greatly; and he became his armor bearer. And Saul **sent** to Jesse, saying, "Let David stand before me; for he has found favor in my sight."

Using his kingly power, Saul delivers an executive order and *sends* for David. Jesse responds by sending his son on a donkey, with bread and wine, and a young goat as a sacrifice. Do you think that Jesus' disciples remembered this story when they saw him ride into Jerusalem, lowly, mounted on a donkey? Later that week, he would offer them bread and wine. But there was no goat. He himself would be the sacri-

fice.

So David arrives at the court of Saul. And the king "loved him greatly; and he became his armor bearer." Then Saul issues another executive order requesting that David take up permanent residence in his court since "he has found favor" in his sight.

The closing verse would seem to indicate that everything worked perfectly for Saul.

### IV. Epilogue: "All is well...?" (16:23)

So it came about whenever the (evil) **spirit** from God came to Saul, David would take the harp and play with his hand; and Saul would be **refreshed** (same root as *spirit*) and be **well**, and the evil **spirit** would depart from him.

The proposal by the unnamed servant is adopted, and his plan works. Whenever the evil spirit came, David played his harp and Saul would be *refreshed*. (This is the same root as the word "spirit"; it means "to make wide, spacious"; thus, David's playing brought Saul relief from the pressure.) Josephus, the Jewish historian, confirms this: "Saul was pleased with him [David], and made him his armor-bearer, and held him in very great esteem; for he charmed his passion, and was the only physician against the trouble he had from the demons, whenever they came upon him, he recited hymns, and played upon the harp, and thus, brought Saul to his right mind again."

Behind the story of the two kings is the story of two spirits. The story opens with the Holy Spirit leaving Saul and an evil spirit taking his place; it closes with the Holy Spirit now in David, confronting the evil spirit in Saul. Through David's skill with the harp, Saul's evil spirit is subdued. The king is refreshed and all is well — but only on the surface. This young man, David, is about to unravel Saul's kingdom.

God in his sovereignty has skillfully maneuvered this shepherd boy by means of his gift for music into the court of the king.

I want to end by giving three reflections on this text.

### V. Reflections

#### (a) How to Spiritually Maneuver

What do you think drives this story of David? The answer is, the sovereignty of God. Behind the scenes, behind all the executive orders lies the constant, resolute, sovereign will of God. He selects the king that he wants, then he uses the most unlikely instruments to maneuver his servant to the stage of his choice. An evil spirit creates the need; unnamed servants propose the solution and identify David; and an arrogant, disobedient king (who thinks he is still in charge) issues all the executive orders. Thus does David arrive on center-stage.

Have you ever felt a desire to be on-stage, playing a role in God's redemption drama? Deep down, we all hunger to have influence in life. We want to influence our children, friends, fellow-workers, neighbors. This text teaches that we do not have to worry about creating our own stage. Part of the mystery of the evil that is reported every night on the television news is that evil spirits are let loose in order to create despair in the hearts of people. It is then, out of that sense of despair, that we are invited to come onto their stage as unnamed servants and announce that we have found the New David, Jesus Christ, who can deal with their demons.

What should we do while we are awaiting that invitation? Let us do what David did. In the wilderness, he focused on maturing spiritually. He learned to pray, and he refined his

skills of speech and music. Then, when the time was right, he was beckoned onto the stage. Our task is not to manipulate, but to grow spiritually and then allow God to *invite* us to the stage of his choice.

### **(b) The Necessity of Confrontation**

God's kingdom does not grow in a terrarium where everything is controlled and growing conditions are perfect. In setting forth his kingdom on earth, God brings David, his chosen representative, into the palace of the rival king to confront demonic forces in Saul. The spiritual king must of necessity learn to confront the earthly powers of darkness and face rejection in order to mysteriously advance the spiritual kingdom. The same thing happened with Jesus. At the moment of his birth, the earthly powers were confronted and Herod tried to kill him. He grew up in hostile Israel and was rejected, but his rejection paved the way for the Gentiles to enter the kingdom of God. Luther and Calvin birthed a Reformation in the church by challenging the corruption of their day. Confrontation is inescapable when the new order is being birthed within the old.

The lesson is clear: We cannot escape the world by building a holy community. God is secretly building the new order within the old, not apart from it.

### **(c) The Weapons of our Warfare**

Saul's disobedience left his soul open to demons, and evil in its worst form infiltrated the king's palace, the very center of Israel's government. But amazingly, a shepherd boy, whose hands were skilled on the harp, had power over the demons! "*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,*" says the Lord" (Zech 4:6). Later, in the dampness of a dark cave, David would reflect:

My soul is among lions;  
I must lie among those who breathe forth fire,  
Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows,  
And their tongue a sharp sword.  
My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!

Awake, my glory;  
Awake, **harp** and lyre,  
I will awaken the dawn!  
I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, among the peoples;  
I will sing praises among the nations.  
For your loyal-love is great to the heavens,  
And your faithfulness to the clouds.  
Be exalted above the heavens, O God;  
Let your glory be above all the earth. (Ps 57:4, 7-11)

The men of war had their spears, but David had his harp. Through his prayers, the Lord's rule would have dominion over the nations.

When the Word of God is sung to music, the soul comes alive and demons are driven out. David's legacy to us is his prayers, the psalms. Let us not neglect to sing them.

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1. see Robert Alter's excellent chapter "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," in his book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-62.
2. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 381.