



# LOVE OR DREAD: HEART RESPONSES TO THE MESSIANIC KING

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 18:1-30  
Fifth Message  
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Last Sunday evening I had the privilege of going to our newcomers class and hearing the stories of those who are new among us, and also sharing my own story with them. Driving home afterwards, I reflected on how intensely personal and deeply emotional — even mystical — was my own early pilgrimage toward God.

Long before I was grounded in doctrine I felt my heart strangely warmed by the love of God. At times I felt myself bathed in his rays of kindness and overcome with appreciation. At the age of nineteen, on a lonely Greek island, as the full moon hung over the Aegean Sea, God came to me with such intensity that the sweetness I felt could not be compared to any human joy. Though I felt such emotions, I didn't always feel free to express them, because I wasn't sure that they were to be a driving force of spirituality. My emphasis then was more on solid teaching, exquisite doctrine, principles for godliness, and effective ministry. So my feelings had to take a back seat. I held that aspect of my spirituality in abeyance and doggedly pursued theology, exegesis, and languages, so much so that later, a friend even labeled me as "stoical and mechanical" in my teaching. Then in 1988 I went to Romania, and there I met a poet. Since that time I have never been the same. He put music to all the blessed doctrine that I had immersed myself in, and as I sat with him I felt as if my soul could sing or even fly. As all those old feelings were revived, it was like a second honeymoon for me.

Our text today on the life of David from the book of 1 Samuel is packed with emotions. David has just slain Goliath and returned from the battlefield, and his epic victory evokes powerful emotions of love, joy and singing throughout Israel, feelings of the kind that hadn't been experienced since the days of the Exodus, when Miriam led all of Israel in dance to the song of Moses. Everyone is moved by the victory of the young warrior. Everyone that is, but one: Saul, the king of Israel. Saul appears in every scene in the text, amidst all the joy-filled emotion brought about by the defeat of the Philistine giant, yet this man refuses to allow anything to move his heart. It is obvious that Saul is the main player in the text. The narrator wants us to focus on him, because there is something of Saul in each one of us. Two questions, then, arise naturally from this text: What happens to our spirituality when we shut off our hearts to the deep emotions of love and joy? And, How much of Saul is in each one of us?

As we begin reading, Jonathan's love is contrasted with Saul's actions.

## I. Jonathan Gives and Saul Takes (18:1-5)

Now it came about when he had finished speaking to Saul, that the **soul** of Jonathan was knit to the **soul** of David, and Jonathan **loved** him as his own **soul**. And Saul took him that day and did **not** allow (**give**) him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he **loved** him as himself. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and **gave** it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt. So

David went out wherever Saul sent him, and **prospered**; and Saul set him over the men of war. And it was pleasing in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants.

In this first scene, Jonathan's soul is inextricably bound up with the soul of David, and he loves him as himself. Stripping himself, Jonathan gives everything he has to David, including his own right to the throne. Saul, in contrast, expresses no emotion, demonstrates no appreciation for David, and gives him nothing. Rather, he takes this son for himself and sends him to do his executive errands. He takes more satisfaction in placing the son over others than in celebrating the joy of the son's victory over the enemy of Israel. But Saul's actions have a considerable impact on the emotions of the rest of Israel for, as verse 5 says, "*it was pleasing in the sight of all the people.*"

The next scene moves from Saul's headquarters to the open fields, where both king and hero are given a triumphant homecoming.

## II. The Women's Joy and Saul's Jealousy (18:6-9)

And it happened as they were coming, when David returned from killing the Philistine, that the **women** came out of all the cities of Israel, to sing in round dances, to meet Saul the King, with tambourines, with **joy** and with musical instruments. And the **women** sang as they played, and said,

*"Saul has slain his thousands,  
And David his ten thousands."*

Then **Saul** became **very angry**, for this saying was **evil in his eyes**; and he said, "They have ascribed (*given*) to David ten thousands, but to me they have ascribed (*given*) thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?" And Saul looked at David with an **evil eye** from that day onwards.

The fatigued men are greeted enthusiastically on the home front. In an action typical of ancient cultures, a new song of victory, sung by the women, breaks forth in Israel. The narrator paints the picture of a whirl of activity surrounding Saul as he is thronged by multitudes of jubilant, singing and dancing worshippers. But, surprisingly, Saul can't enter in. The women sing,

*"Saul has slain his thousands,  
And David his **ten** thousands."*

The song is no insult to Saul. It merely reflects a typical literary structure of Hebrew poetry. When a poet wanted to express a certain thought in numbers, he would put a number in the first line and then increase it by one unit in the next line (for example, 1-2; 1,000-10,000) so as to create an intensification, but not necessarily an antithesis, between the two lines. We find an example of this very thing in Deuteronomy:

*"How could **one** man pursue a **thousand** of them  
How could **two** put **ten thousand** to flight,  
If their Rock had not sold them to their enemies,*

*If the LORD had not handed them over?" (Deut 32:30)*

So the women of Israel lavish their praise on both heroes. The text clearly states that they came out to honor Saul, their king, not David. But now Saul sees everything through the lens of jealousy. He takes an innocent song, with no insult intended, and interprets it as a personal affront. The women, he feels, are giving more glory to David than to him. His anger burns. He could suppress his emotions before his son, but not before a choir of jubilant women. So he isolates himself from the celebration, refusing to allow the song to penetrate his heart. In the meantime, the people take David into their hearts.

Then, amazingly, the king says of David, *"What more can he have but the kingdom?"* What an astonishing statement! In his jealousy, Saul subconsciously gives voice to the divine purpose behind David's arrival in his own court, which was to take over his throne! The fact that David had already been given the throne was a well-kept secret, but in these words Saul's paranoia intersects with God's divine purpose that David take over Saul's kingdom. Someone said, "Just because your paranoid, doesn't mean no one's chasing you!" Walter Brueggemann comments: "Thus far, however, the intent of Yahweh had been a well-kept secret. No one knew, but in the voice of the women, and through the prism of Saul's own fear and paranoia, he sees David's future. There is keen irony in the fact that the fearful discernment of Saul and the grand intent of the LORD converge in seeing David destined for royal power."

What Saul cannot see, however, is that this development is not the result of David's ambition, but the irrevocable will and resolve of the LORD. Thus, from this day forward he sees David with an *"evil eye."*

The next scene moves from the open fields to the privacy of Saul's home — an apt symbol of his isolation. Here, the king's hidden emotions finally give birth to action.

### III. A Demon's Rage and Saul's Fear (18:10-13)

Now it came about on the next day that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved (literally: *prophesied*) in the midst of the house, while David was playing the harp with his **hand**, daily; and a spear was in Saul's **hand**. And Saul hurled the spear for he thought, "I will impale David to the wall." But David escaped (turned) **from his presence** twice. Now Saul was **afraid** of David; for the **LORD was with him**, but had **departed** from the **presence** of Saul. Therefore Saul **caused him to depart** from his **presence**, and appointed him as his commander of a thousand; and he went out and came in before the **presence** of the people.

In scene one, Saul successfully suppressed his emotions by means of manipulative actions. In scene two, the jubilant women provoked his true feelings. Jealousy was born, and settled deep into his soul. Now in scene three, through the doorway of anger and jealousy, an evil spirit has free access to his soul and drives him stark raving mad. Have you ever gone to bed angry? The enemy loves to see you do that, because then he has free access, an open door, to your soul. This was what happened to Saul. His anger and jealousy give free rain to Satan, with the result that he goes mad.

It is ironic that only David with his harp can soothe the king. But David, too, drives Saul mad — mad with jealousy. The king is trapped in an endless cycle: he need this musician, yet at the same time he is repelled by him. Saul, with his spear, appears outwardly motionless, yet a seething volcano churns within his soul, while David, playing his harp, is in

constant motion.

Finally, Saul erupts and gives his first gift to David: he hurls his spear at him. But the spear in the hand of a demon is no match for the harp in the hand of the man of Spirit. David's movements are too quick for Saul's impotent spear. His plan to rid himself of David met with failure, fear now bores its way into Saul's heart of steel. And so should he be afraid, for the LORD is with David. Saul has no recourse but to drive him away from his presence and that of the people.

This brings us to the center-line of the text. Here we learn what lies behind all of these emotions.

### IV. Center Line: The Reason Behind the Emotions Which David Evokes (18:14-16)

Now David was **prospering** in all his ways; for the **LORD was with him**. When Saul saw that he was **prospering** greatly, then he **dreaded** him. But **all Israel** and Judah **loved** David, for he was going out and coming in before them.

This, the center line of the chapter, gives the theological reason for David's popularity, and it is this: "The LORD was with him." This phrase, which is given three times in the chapter, is the reason for David's success, charisma and magnetism. It is the reason behind Israel's love of David and Saul's dread of him. People either love this king, because he is the savior, or dread him, because they are his rival. Saul can't see this. He can only react to the effects of it, which he sees as David's prosperity. So it is with any man who suppresses his emotions to control others: he loses spiritual perception. Because he won't allow his heart to feel, he is unable to see the spiritual issues that govern everything else, and so he becomes emotionally unstable. J.P. Fokkeman comments: "Saul...has placed his center of gravity outside himself, thus cannot retain his equilibrium and makes himself completely dependent on what takes place outside himself, while David remains with himself and finds his fortune and self-development on his own ways."

Have you noticed that sports fanatics are very much affected by how their teams are doing? But true spirituality means that your center of gravity is within you: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory,"* in the apostle Paul's wonderful phrase. If the Lord is with you, as he was with David, then circumstances and people outside you will not affect you. Saul's equilibrium depended on what David was doing, and this was what destroyed him.

This then is the turning point of the chapter. With his brilliant observation that David is prospering, Saul's role changes from passive to active, from one of reacting to the emotions of others to attempting to manipulate them in order to dispose of David.

He begins by finally offering a gift to David.

### V. Saul's Deceptive Gift to David (18:17-19)

Then Saul said to David, "Here is my older daughter Merab; I will **give** her to you as a wife, **only** be a valiant man for me and fight the LORD's battles." For Saul thought, "My **hand** shall not be against him, but let the **hand** of the Philistines be against him." But David said to Saul, "Who am I, and what is my life, or my father's family in Israel; that I should be the king's son-in-law?" So it came about at the time when Merab, Saul's daughter, should have been **given** to David, that she was **given** to Adriel the Meholathite for a wife.

Since Saul's hand was impotent to kill David directly, he

tries again, this time under the pretext of offering him his daughter in marriage, hoping that the hand of the Philistines will accomplish for him his evil ends. Notice that Saul initiates the conversation with David. Fokklem points out that “this is the last time that Saul speaks to David of his own free will; he does so in 24 and 26, but only because David stalked and cornered Saul and compels him to speak.” But Saul is a poor actor.

Rather than approaching David with appreciation, and fulfilling his promise to give his daughter in marriage to the one who would slay Goliath, Saul roughly pushes his daughter forward as a mere object: “*Behold my daughter...her, I give you for a wife.*” There is no word of love, and no consideration for Merab. Then, rather hastily and clumsily, he ties the idea of marriage with that of war — a dead giveaway for his real motives: “*only be a valiant man for me.*” Saul is willing to sacrifice even those closest to him (this is typical of controlling types) to achieve what he wants.

David’s question, “*Who am I? And what is my father’s family in Israel?*” is a subtle reminder to Saul that he had already promised to grant the family of the victor over Goliath tax-free status in Israel (17:25). David’s shrewdly humble response is designed to give Saul pause and force him to take responsibility for his past promises. Instead, the provoked Saul shirks his responsibility. Merab is *not given* to David, but arbitrarily brushed aside and given to another, no questions asked, because the king has decided. All of this is designed to make David feel like a mere plaything in the eyes of the king — something that Saul takes great pleasure in.

But there is one problem left to deal with: David is still alive. So Saul sets a more complex snare.

## VI. Saul’s Feigned Emotions Toward David (18:20-27)

Now Michal, Saul’s daughter, **loved** David. When they told Saul, the thing was **upright in his eyes**. And Saul thought, “I will **give** her to him that she may become a snare to him, and that the **hand** of the Philistines may be against him.” Therefore Saul said to David, “For a second time you may be my son-in-law today.” Then Saul commanded his servants, “Speak to David secretly, saying, ‘Behold, the king **delights** in you, and all his servants **love** you; now therefore, become the king’s son-in-law.’” So Saul’s servants spoke these words to David. But David said, “Is it trivial in your sight to become the king’s son-in-law, since I am a poor man and lightly esteemed?” And the servants of Saul reported to him saying “According to these words which David spoke.” Saul then said, “Thus you shall say to David, ‘The king does not desire any dowry, except a hundred **foreskins** of the Philistines, to take vengeance on the king’s enemies.’” Now Saul planned to make David fall by the **hand** of the Philistines. When his servants told David these words, The matter was **upright in the eyes** of David, to become the king’s son-in-law. Before the days had expired, David rose up and went, he and his men, and struck down two hundred men among the Philistines. Then David brought their **foreskins**, and they **gave** them in full number to the king, that he might become the king’s son-in-law. So Saul **gave** him Michal his daughter for a wife.

Saul tries a second time, but on this occasion he distances himself from David and adds the missing element — that of emotions — which he had neglected in his first proposal. Hearing that his daughter loves David, he reckons he can use her emotions to his advantage (“*it was upright in his eyes*”). But this time he is not so direct and blunt. He veils his offer under

the guise of his own feigned emotions: “*The king delights in you (utterly false), and all his servants love you (soon to be true).*” It is dangerous to feign emotions because you are ambitious. If you do, your heart will begin to die and you will never feel emotions again.

Not having a dowry, David again answers with humility: “*I am a poor man and lightly esteemed.*” Saul responds by asking for what is for him an appropriate dowry: one hundred foreskins of the Philistines. He links marriage with death, and that of the worst kind — making someone sexually impotent. He may have come up with this plan because he was jealous of what he took to be David’s acclaim among the women of Israel, thus he desired to contaminate him to make him unclean.

Now the matter becomes “*upright in the eyes of David.*” David acts hastily and *gives* to Saul twice what is required (perhaps to indicate he is not playing the game on Saul’s terms and adds 100 as a love gift his bride), so Saul must reluctantly *give* his *promised gift*. Note that everyone gives a gift to this anointed king: Jonathan gives his love; the women their praise; and Saul his daughter.

## VII. Epilogue: All Emotions Toward David Consummated (18:28-30)

When Saul saw and knew that **the LORD was with David**; and that Michal, Saul’s daughter, **loved** him, then Saul was even **more afraid** of David. Thus Saul was David’s enemy continually (*all the days*). Then the commanders of the Philistines went out to battle; and it happened as often as they went out, that David behaved himself more wisely than all the servants of Saul. So his name was **highly esteemed** (literally: *precious*).

Despite all of Saul’s executive powers, as we come to the end of the account there is no change; in fact, things are worse. Now Saul’s daughter loves David, just as his son does — and so does all Israel. David is now firmly entrenched in the royal court as a legal heir to the throne. Through his own manipulative actions, Saul has finally come to know what everyone else in Israel already knows: *the LORD is with David*.

The lesson for Saul is clear: If he would not join in the parade of love, he was doomed to live in isolation and failure, because he was fighting against God himself. It is God who works everything to the good of David and nothing to the good of Saul. “We are invited to watch while history works its relentless way toward God’s intention. History is not a blind force or an act of sheer power. There is a purpose at work that regularly astonishes us. It is a power that disrupts and heals. David is now carried on the wave of this purpose. The ones who trust the story ride atop this flow of history with David. They ride there with David every time they tell or hear the story. The others, like Saul, either die or go mad” (Walter Brueggemann).

### Reflections

What is this ancient story saying to us today? The question each of us must ask ourselves this morning is: Who do I identify with in this story, Saul or David? When the story of David is re-enacted on Israel’s stage a thousand years later, the same dynamics are at work. Jesus, anointed with the Spirit of God, becomes the new David and slays not only Israel’s enemy, but the greater enemy of mankind, the devil. When the early Christians gazed upon the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, so melted by love were they that they rejoiced and danced. Theirs was a spirituality driven by hearts that were tender toward Christ. But what of those who refused to feel, the rival

kings who only felt threatened by this One? Like Saul of old, their manipulative actions only furthered the gospel, while they themselves died or went mad.

Is there any hope for present-day Sauls? Must those who shut out God, and shut out the feelings of others, controlling, manipulating and destroying them in the process, must they all all "die or go mad"? In the history of Christianity, perhaps no one was more awestruck in reading this story than that brilliant Jew, Saul of Tarsus. He, too, was from the tribe of Benjamin. Though he was not a head taller in stature, he was so in theological training, far surpassing his countryman in learning and zeal. Then one day he came in contact with the new David. This One had slain Goliath on a cross, and he, too, like David of old, was stealing all of Israel's heart. Saul of Tarsus burned with rage and zeal. Determined to stamp out the movement, and given legal authorization to do so, he, too, threw a spear. Unlike the Saul of old, however, his spear found its mark in one follower of Christ named Stephen.

But in the end, the LORD was with the little band of disciples. Saul's manipulative actions only furthered their cause. His persecution of them forced them to disperse, and as they did they spread The Story even further (Acts 8:4). Saul's rage intensified, almost consuming him, and he headed off to Damascus carrying the death warrants of all who loved the Savior. Then on the Damascus Road, a voice came from heaven saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" — echoing

David's words to Saul in 1 Samuel 26:18. Saul was blinded and broken. That day he was changed from the enemy of God to the friend of God, from the persecutor of the church to the great apostle who gave his life for the church.

Can God revive the emotions of controlling personalities who have destroyed the lives of others? What emotions do you think Saul of Tarsus felt as he re-read the ancient story of Saul and saw it re-enacted in his own life and, instead of his going mad and dying, both Christ and Stephen died for him? Do you think Paul had emotions? Could he love like a Jonathan? Read his letters: "The love of Christ constrains me...whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as a loss for the sake of Christ." Could Paul sing with joy like the women of Israel? He sang in a Philippian jail for the love of Christ. Could he love like Michal? He wrote: "I have fond affection for you like that of a nursing mother who tenderly cares for her own children." What changed him? It was nothing less than God's all-pursuing love for sinners.

*Amazing love! how can it be,  
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?*

Oh Saul, where are you today? May you see Christ and be converted from the heart.

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