



DEATH OF THE INNOCENTS

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 22:6-23
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One of the questions that has haunted believers for centuries is this: If God is sovereign, why does evil seem to run rampant in the world? This issue was tackled by one rabbi in his study of the book of Job. The result was his popular book, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" He concluded that God cares, but he is not sovereign.

How would you answer that question? Most Christians, unfortunately, have an inadequate theology, one that does not allow for all the complexities of things like evil, sin and death. Some Christians don't even bother to address such weighty matters. They skirt around the issue of evil as though it does not exist. For them, Christianity is hardly anything more than a ticket to heaven. But a glance at the newspaper or the nightly television news convinces that evil is an issue that cannot be avoided. Think of places like Rwanda, Croatia, Cuba and Haiti. Think of names like Nicole Simpson and Polly Klaas.

A brother from Eastern Europe who has seen much suffering wrote the following in a letter to me after he had spent a year in a men's Bible study with us:

My dear brothers in Christ,

I feel good among you and I like your gladness
I like to see you happy, laughing with jokes.
This is a blessed land, with no war for centuries,
Many generations you have lived in peace and wealth.

But I have come from the communist hell
And I can't forget the horrors I've lived and seen;
I cannot forget the hate sown between all men
And the desperate struggle in which I have been.

So, you mustn't be surprised when you are joking
And laughing; I can only be smiling!
Sorrow is marked on my mind and my face
Because my life was stolen and in slavery placed.

Brothers, forgive me, I can't laugh with you
From the whole body and heart like you!
I think about my people and I cannot enjoy
While they die by starvation, men, women, and boy.
(Aurel Stancu)

Evil does seem to have free rein, doesn't it?

If we read our Bible carefully, however, we will discover that Scripture does indeed deal forthrightly with the issue of evil. Today's text is a good example. We are going to look at a passage from 1 Samuel that deals with the slaughter of innocent men, women and children. At first, I wasn't eager to preach on this "dark side" of the Davidic narrative in our studies on the life of David. But as I studied, I found that this text began to unlock the great mysteries of evil and the sovereignty of God. So today we will

seek answers to the following questions: What is God doing when the devil seems to have free rein to practice evil in society? Can any good come of this in the end? If God is sovereign, is man culpable for his choices? What do the righteous do in the meantime?

The evil in 1 Samuel 22:5-23, gathers around the actions of King Saul as he takes vicious revenge against the priesthood in Nob for what he believes to be treason in Ahimelech's allegedly aiding David in his escape. The entire chapter is dominated by six speeches by Saul, utterances which are very revealing as to his character. In his first speech, in verses 6-8, the king reacts to information he has received as to David's whereabouts.

I. A Pity Party¹ (22:6-8)

Then Saul heard that David and the men who were with him had been discovered. Now Saul was sitting in Gibeah, under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing around him. And Saul said to his servants who stood around him, "Hear now, O Benjamites! Will the son of Jesse also give to all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? For all of you have conspired against me so that there is no one who discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse, and there is none of you who is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in ambush, as it is this day." (NASB)

This scene has two movements. First, we have a visual aid of Saul's state of mind as he positions himself; and then we hear his speech. Both movements depict a man who is paranoid, fearful, and extremely arrogant. In this formal meeting Saul has positioned himself at the center of everything. He sits higher than everyone else ("Gibeah" means "height"). All of life, he imagines, revolves around him. He sits under the tamarisk tree, his hand gripping the inevitable spear, a symbol of his impotence. All this maneuvering to ensure that he is looked up to indicates that something is going on deep in his subconscious.

In his speech, Saul addresses those who are closest to him, from his own tribe of Benjamin, and lashes out at them for what he deems to be disloyal behavior. One commentator has this to say about his speech: "The factual content of the speech is minimal, the emotional content maximal. This is apparent from the fact that the order of the facts in the speech is exactly opposite the actual chronological order" (Fokkelman). If we read the rhetorical speech in reverse order, we can understand what Saul perceived to be the order of events around him. He thinks:

his son had made David into one who lay in wait for him;

as a result, no one had any sympathy for him;
hence none of them warned him;
they had entered into a conspiracy against him;
as a result, they were all too susceptible to bribes from
the enemy.

When the emotional content of a discussion becomes greater than the factual, reason and logic go out the window. Saul views everything in life through the lens of paranoia, thus he accuses those closest to him of conspiring against him. To the paranoid, everything looks like a conspiracy. Everyone is against him, Saul imagines. No one feels sorry for him. He has limitless compassion for himself. But that can't comfort him, so he seeks comfort from others. None of his courtiers answer his tirade, however. There is dead silence, because everyone loved David, "even Saul's servants," as we read in 18:5, 22.

Then, taking advantage of the silence, an alien informant steps forward.

II. An Alien Informant (22:9-10)

Then Doeg the Edomite, who was standing by the servants of Saul, answered and said, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. And he inquired of the LORD for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

After a long silence, Doeg, whom we met earlier when David visited the tabernacle at Nob, takes the floor. A foreigner, his name, ironically, means "anxious caring." "His word takes precedence; his act will end the session. He starts by informing on the events at Nob, and ends by carrying out at Saul's behest the massacre of the priesthood. As a foreigner he can skirt round the taboo which protects the priests of Yahweh and makes them untouchable, which paralyzes the Israelite courtiers" (Fokkelman).

Notice how cunning is Doeg's speech. He informs Saul of the concrete results of David's meeting with the priest, but not their conversation. By so doing he not only omits David's lies, but Ahimelech's questions which demonstrated the priest's loyalty to Saul and his nervousness before David. The result is that the triple support of the oracle, the provisions, and the sword—everything looks like treason, plain as day. "Doeg knows that these facts are grist for the mill of Saul's obsession. This incident is a good example of how 'simply stating the facts' is already a refined manipulation" (Fokkelman). Naked facts do not always reveal motives. They can mask true intent when robbed of their context. This is how our legal system seems to work, isn't it? Attorneys are paid big money to isolate whatever facts they wish to utilize, omitting others, thus creating an entirely different picture from what really happened. This is what Doeg is doing here. Things haven't changed much in thousands of years, have they?

But Doeg doesn't stop there. He adds that Ahimelech gave an oracle on that day when David visited the sanctuary. Is this statement true or is it merely an invention of Doeg?

This leads us to the next scene, a kangaroo court.

III. A Kangaroo Court (22:11-19)

(a) Saul as Court Summons and Prosecutor (22:11-13)

Then the king sent someone to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's household,

the priests who were in Nob; and all of them came to the king. And Saul said, "Listen now, son of Ahitub." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." Saul then said to him, "Why have you and the son of Jesse conspired against me, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, that he should rise up against me by lying in ambush as it is this day?"

In another indication of his paranoia, Saul issues a summons not just to Ahimelech, but to his whole household. The priest journeys to Gibeah, escorted by an armed guard. He is unaware that there is anything wrong, but probably surprised by the summons to present himself before the king. In this court Saul plays every role: he claims to be the injured party, then he becomes the court summons, prosecutor, judge and executioner. Talk about a high control individual! When people exert total control like this, it shows they place no trust in God for justice. "Saul's feelings are utterly detached from justice and impartiality, and equally remote from reality. It is ironic that such a display of raw power as this actually is a sign of Saul's impotence, insofar as the aggression vented on the house of Eli was intended for his rival, whom he could not get at" (Fokkelman). Beware of situations where people insist on playing multiple roles in order to manipulate the outcome.

Next we come to Ahimelech's defense. Here is the center-piece of the text, the speech that the narrator wants us to attend to.

(b) Ahimelech's Defense (22:14-15)

Then Ahimelech answered the king and said, "And who among all your servants is as faithful as David, even the king's son-in-law, who is captain over your guard, and is honored in your house? Did I just begin to inquire of God for him today? Far be it from me! Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any of the household of my father, for your servant knows nothing at all of this whole affair."

What a brilliant and courageous defense by Ahimelech! His speech is rather surprising, because the things he says and the things he omits do not help his own chances of survival. His words are a rare display of courage in the face of raw evil.

To begin with, he elevates David to the skies. "Who among all your servants is as *faithful* as David?" he asks the king. "Faithful" here means an internal loyalty which has brought David great respect and places him above all the king's servants. Then the priest points to Saul's own actions as proof of David's good character: "You made him **your** son in law, your made him captain of **your** guard, you honored him in **your** house."

Then Ahimelech asks: "Did I just now begin to inquire for him?" He doesn't answer the charge of whether he did or not. That's not the issue. Even if he did, it would make no difference since such an act would not be treason. Thus he gets to the root of the problem and forces Saul to deal with his own guilt in the matter. He is asking the king, "Are you saying that loyalty to David amounts to treason?" There was no treason involved, of course. Ahimelech refuses to share in the attitude that says "anyone who is for David is against Saul." He considers it beneath him to answer Saul on Saul's terms. He will not crawl on his knees before this despot to cajole him. Instead he answers,

rather impertinently, "Did I just begin to inquire of God for him today?"

Here we have the center-piece of the text, the thought the narrator wants us to contemplate. What do the righteous do in the face of raw evil? Ahimelech teaches us that the primary task of godly people is to put the whole truth right out in the public arena when the pathology of the despot threatens complete obscurity. It took guts to speak the truth and brave the violent pressure that would surely result. May God give us courage when our hour comes to uncover and reveal the truth in whatever arena we find ourselves.

Rather than face his own guilt, however, Saul turns aside the testimony and in an instant becomes both judge and executioner.

(c) Saul as Judge and Executioner (22:16-19)

But the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's household!" And the king said to the guards who were attending him, "Turn around and put the priests of the LORD to death, because their hand also is with David and because they knew that he was fleeing and did not reveal it to me." But the servants of the king were not willing to put forth their hands to attack the priests of the LORD. Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn around and attack the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned around and attacked the priests, and he killed that day eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. And he struck Nob the city of the priests with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and infants; also oxen, donkeys, and sheep, he struck with the edge of the sword.

Making no attempt to investigate the priest's claim, Saul now adopts the role of an arbitrary judge. He doesn't believe Ahimelech. Case closed. He convicts the suspect outright, and immediately commands the execution of the whole household. To Saul, the guilt of the individual automatically implies the guilt of the whole family. But when he turns to the soldiers and commands them to carry out the execution, they refuse to obey. It is unthinkable for a Jew to raise a hand against the priests of Yahweh. (We are reminded of a similar arbitrary death sentence in 14:24, which Saul imposed upon his son, but the people overruled him.)

Saul then turns to a foreigner, one who has no qualms or inhibitions. This is why dictators love to hire mercenaries. And Doeg responded in kind. He "*hewed them down*," says the text. His ethnic hatred of Jews made the killings easy for him; he delighted in his work of butchery. But it doesn't end there. The killing spree spills over into the city and climaxes with a total massacre at Nob.

Notice the extent of it. There were no sexual distinctions: both men and women were slaughtered; no age distinctions: children and infants; and all animal life. It was as if Saul were carrying out a holy war. He was commanded in chapter 15 to do this very thing to the Amalakites, but he disobeyed the command of God and spared the king and the best of the donkeys. His eye had pity on what God called evil. This was why he was rejected as king. Here he strikes back at the LORD, as if to say, "If it's a holy war you want, you can have it!" This is what lies behind much of the senseless killing that is going on around the world

today. Often the violence is not being addressed so much at the victims as at God himself.

The *Jesus* film is a very effective tool for evangelism throughout the world today. But there has been a response of evil to its showing. Last week in Rwanda, two people who were showing the film were murdered. Dr. Kassoum Keita, Campus Crusade Director for Rwanda, writes: "What's happened in Rwanda is impossible to imagine. How can people who are humans like us, dare to not only kill people who are armed but to kill the unarmed, even babies and women who are pregnant? They have no pity for them and assassinate them. You see bodies just lying around and people going by and no one taking any interest in them. Journalists usually have a reputation of exaggerating things. But in this case, they don't even have the words to be able to describe what is going on." Doeg still lives three thousand years later.

Yet, even in Doeg's massacre of the priests, Saul is unsuccessful. One son escapes.

IV. A Remnant Escapes (22:20-23)

But one son of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. Then David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have brought about the death of every person in your father's household. Stay with me, do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life; for you are safe with me."

We learn three things here. First, although evil is allowed to play its hand in full, God ensures that a remnant escapes. And with that remnant the kingdom of God will go on. Though the linen garments of the priests are stained with blood, there is one who escapes defilement. The future king has the future priesthood. God never needs a majority to win the battle. All he needs is one.

Secondly, while Saul unconsciously wishes to take revenge on the LORD, unbeknownst to him he is actually the instrument of God's fulfillment of the oracle of doom against the house of Eli. Under the deep-seated level of Saul's subconscious which wants to hit back lies the deeper and more powerful force of God's providence. This may be hard for us to comprehend and accept, but that is what is going on here.

I visited a friend out of state earlier this summer and he was bemoaning what he felt was the lack of wisdom of the political establishment of the state. At last he said, "I can't wait until the Lord comes back and runs this place right!" I said, "But Christ is reigning and running it right, even now." The eye of faith believes that the Sovereign God is allowing evil to run its full course, yet judgment, righteousness and salvation proceed, just as he planned from the beginning.

Thirdly, the fact that God is sovereign does not remove human responsibility and care. David is deeply pained by what has happened, and he takes full responsibility. He expresses that he felt uneasy on that day when he spied Doeg at Nob, and he promises to do all in his power to offer protection to Abiathar.

Last week the television had a program on Beethoven's

Fifth Symphony in C minor. I watched in fascination as the conductor explained the intricacies of the composer's work. This symphony changed music for all time, he said. The masterpiece does not merely utilize major and minor keys, but resonates between them, creating new chords in the process. One experiences every possible human emotion as the symphony is performed. As I listened to the music I thought, this is what biblical narrative does to our theology. Often our theology is not broad enough to embrace all that we experience in life, but the beauty of biblical narrative is that it deals with all the stories, and in the process keeps expanding our categories.

This was what happened to David. His reflections on this incident at Gibeah led him to the insights which he penned in Psalm 52.

V. David's Final Reflections (Psalm 52)

(For the choir director. A Maskil of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said to him, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech.")

- 1 Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man?
The loyal-love of God endures all day long.
- 2 Your tongue devises destruction,
Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit.
- 3 You love evil more than good,
Falsehood more than speaking what is right. *Selah.*
- 4 You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.
- 5 But God will break you down forever;
He will snatch you up, and tear you away from your tent,
And uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah.*
- 6 And the righteous will see and fear,
And will laugh at him, saying,
- 7 "Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge,
But trusted in the abundance of his riches,
And was strong in his evil desire."
- 8 But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God;
I trust in the loyal-love of God forever and ever.
- 9 I will give Thee thanks forever, because Thou hast done it,
And I will wait on Thy name, for it is good, in the presence of Thy godly ones.

What began with Saul sitting on the tamarisk tree in Gibeah and ended with the slaughter of the innocents, enlarged David's theology. Evil is free to play all its cards, but it will be exposed for what it is. Innocent people die, but God cares, God weeps.

Saul's kangaroo court was not the real court. By faith David saw another court, presided over by the Sovereign God. The faithful will wait for that Judge and take refuge in his great love until they are vindicated. On that day every man will give an account for every action and word. On that day the dead in Christ will come to life, and those who waited on his name will give thanks forever "because he has done it." On that day the mystery of evil will give way to a new heavens and a new earth, and the justified in Christ will be as green olive trees in the house of God, forever and ever. Amen.

Literary Outline²

- A. a) 3 lines of report (David spotted, Saul informed) 6
as an introduction to:
 - b) 7 lines of speech by Saul 7-8
Saul's paranoia causes him to disregard his best advisors.
- B. Betrayal by Doeg (mainly in speech) 9-10
- C. Saul summons Ahimelech and calls him to account 11-12
- D. Saul's accusation 13
- X. Ahimelech's defense 14-15
He is innocent, and only behaved toward David with the respect Saul had already given him.
- D'. Saul's judgment 16
- C'. Saul orders murder of Ahimelech and priests 17
- B'. Doeg acts, carries out the execution 18-19
- A'. a) 3 lines of report (Abiathar escapes, David informed) 20-21
as an introduction to:
 - b) 7 lines of speech by David:
David takes responsibility for what happened, in sharp contrast to Saul.

1. For my observations in the text I have heavily depended on the excellent insights of J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986), 379-416.

2. Fokkelman, 412.

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