

The Spirit and the Kings

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~ 1 Samuel 16

Introduction

- We are now several weeks into our journey, exploring the person and work of the Holy Spirit.
 - In week one, we watched Him hovering over the waters of creation, bringing life out of nothing.
 - In week two, we saw Him filling artisans with supernatural skill to build the Tabernacle.
 - In week three, we watched God take a portion of the Spirit that was on Moses and empower seventy elders so they could help Moses lead the Israelites during their time in the wilderness.
- After this, Moses passed the baton to Joshua, who led the people across the Jordan, conquered strongholds, and settled the tribes.
- But once that generation died, Israel forgot the Lord and the nation spiralled into a 400-year period of absolute spiritual anarchy—the era of the Judges, which we heard about in week 4.
 - Without a centralised leader, the people would drift into idolatry.
 - God would allow foreign oppressors to enslave them.

- They would cry out in desperation, and the Holy Spirit would suddenly *rush* upon Judges—ad-hoc, unconventional warriors like Gideon and Samson—to rescue them.
- By the end of the era of the Judges, the Israelites were still in a pretty bad place.
 - The priesthood, under Eli, Hophni and Phinehas had become entirely corrupted.
 - Israel found themselves in a catastrophic war with their fiercest enemy: the iron-wielding Philistines.
 - In a blind panic on the battlefield, the elders treated the Ark of the Covenant like a magical good-luck charm. They marched it into battle, and it was a total disaster.
 - The Philistines slaughtered the army, killed Eli's sons, and captured the Ark.
 - Eli, hearing the news of his sons, fell backward, broke his neck, and died.
 - Although divine plagues eventually forced the Philistines to send the Ark back, it was never reunited with the Tabernacle. It remained separated from the central place of worship.
- At this point in history, Samuel enters the scene.
 - He is the last of the Judges and the first of the formal Prophets.
 - Samuel successfully restored that godly, Moses-style system of circuit-court justice.
 - But as Samuel grew old, his own sons proved corrupt, and a panicked Israel refused to trust God's invisible rule any longer. They didn't want to

wait around for God to raise up a Spirit-empowered deliverer every time an enemy knocked on their door. They wanted security they could see. They wanted a standing army. They demanded a king.

- God granted their rebellious request by giving them exactly what they ask for: Saul.
- But as it turned out, Saul was a less than ideal king.
 - In [1 Samuel 10](#), when Samuel was anointing and appointing and orientating Saul as king, he explained to him that he was to go down to Gilgal, where the Philistine garrison was located. He was to wait 7 days for Samuel to arrive. When he arrived, Samuel was to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to God, following which, he would advise Saul and the nation of Israel what to do about these pesky Philistines.
 - In [1 Samuel 13](#), the Philistines came against Israel with 30 000 chariots and 6000 horsemen, the Scriptures say that their number was like the sand on the seashore. Saul waits 7 days, as per the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel does not come and the people begin to scatter. Saul panics, calls for the burnt offerings and peace offerings, and proceeds to offer them himself.
 - As it turns out, this was an absolute no-no. In doing this, Saul usurped Samuel's authority and took upon himself the role of prophet-priest, which was not his to take.
- Fast forward two chapters and we see Samuel issuing a prophetic instruction to Saul.
- "Attack the Amalekites. Utterly destroy them. Do not spare anything. Kill man, woman, infant, nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

- Saul attacks the Amalekites but spares Agag, their king, and takes the best of their livestock as spoil.
- As it turns out, God is not a God of compromise. He issues an instruction, He expects us to obey.
- Following this second act of disobedience, God tells Samuel that He regretted setting up Saul as king.
- In a searing prophetic confrontation, Samuel looks Saul in the eye and tells him that
 - Obedience is better than sacrifice,
 - Rebellion is the same as divination, and
 - Insubordination is the same as idolatry.
- By the time we get to [1 Samuel 16](#), Saul still wears the royal crown and sits in his palace, but God has officially rejected his leadership, setting the stage for a radical move of the Holy Spirit.
- Let's read the text together.

1 Samuel 16:1-3 NASB95

¹ Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." ² But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears *of it*, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.'" ³ "You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you."

1 Samuel 16:4-6 NASB95

⁴ So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, “Do you come in peace?” ⁵ He said, “In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. ⁶ When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before Him.”

1 Samuel 16:7–9 NASB95

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.” ⁹ Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.”

1 Samuel 16:10–13 NASB95

¹⁰ Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” ¹¹ And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are these all the children?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep.” Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹² So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him; for this is he.” ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah.

1 Samuel 16:14–16 NASB95

¹⁴ Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him. ¹⁵ Saul’s servants then said to him, “Behold now, an evil spirit from God is terrorizing you.” ¹⁶ “Let our lord now command your servants who are before you. Let them seek a man 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 *the harp* with his hand, and you will be well.”

1 Samuel 16:17–20 NASB95

¹⁷ So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me now a man who can play well and bring *him* to me.” ¹⁸ Then one of the young men 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.” ¹⁹ So Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me your son David who is with the flock.” ²⁰ Jesse took a donkey *loaded with* bread and a jug of wine and a young goat, and sent *them* to Saul by David his son.

1 Samuel 16:21–23 NASB95

²¹ Then David came to Saul and attended him; and Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor bearer. ²² Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David now stand before me, for he has found favor in my sight.” ²³ So it came about whenever the *evil* spirit from God came to Saul, David would take the harp and play *it* with his hand; and Saul would be refreshed and be well, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

- Friends, there are two things that I would like to highlight from this passage this morning.

1. The Spirit Sees What We Cannot

- When you read this story, the grand arc is clear: the Spirit departs from Saul and comes on David instead.
- But if I am honest, this text leaves me with a massive question.
- What did Saul *actually* do that was so terrible?
- I mean, let’s think about it.

- In the first place, he offered a religious sacrifice a few days early because Samuel didn't show up when he was supposed to, his army was deserting him, and he was God's appointed ruler, who had been authorised to make executive decisions.
- In the second place, he showed some mercy by keeping an enemy king alive and saving some livestock so his people could celebrate and offer sacrifices to Yahweh.
- Sure, they were "no-no's." But do they really strike you as monumental, unpardonable blunders?
- Especially when you compare his blunders to those of David!
 - David committed adultery with a friend's wife, got her pregnant, and then carried out a cold-blooded military assassination to cover it up.
 - By any human ethical standard, David's sins are just as bad, if not worse than those of Saul.
- So why does Saul get stripped of his kingdom permanently, while David is shown radical mercy?
- For me, the interpretive clue lies in brilliant literary device that is utilised in this passage.
- The device, which was often used by Hebrew writers, is called a *Leitwort* (German for "lead-word").
- A *Leitwort* is a structural technique where a writer intentionally saturates a very short narrative with a single root word. The writer repeatedly drops the exact same root word into the text to draw attention to a major theme.
- In [1 Samuel 16](#), there is a single Hebrew root word, or a derivative thereof, that repeats like a heartbeat in almost every major movement of the 23-verse narrative.

- That word is *Ra'ah*—the verb *to see* and the hinge or focal point comes in verse 7:

1 Samuel 16:7 NKJV

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For *the LORD does not see as man sees*; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

- The author is anchoring the entire narrative on a profound contrast between two different modes of perception.
- Humans look at the outside.
 - Saul was a specimen—taller than everyone else from his shoulders up. Eliab looked just like him. Even Samuel, the great "Seer" of Israel, is struck spiritually blind in Jesse's living room, trying to pick a king based on muscle and height. David was also visually striking — he was ruddy with beautiful eyes and is described as good-looking.
- But the Holy Spirit looks at the things we cannot see.
- He looks at the heart — the Hebrew is *lebab*—the inner person, the mind, the will, the conscience.
- When God looks at Saul and David, He isn't weighing their behavioural mistakes on a legal scale.
- If He were to do so, the scales would balance out, or perhaps even tip against David.
- Instead, He is looking at a more fundamental level: the internal posture and character of both men.
- And that difference is exposed most clearly in how these two men handle their failure.

- When Saul is caught, his "repentance" is an exercise in public relations. He says the words *"I have sinned,"* but in the very next breath, he blames his troops and begs Samuel, *"Please honor me before the elders so I don't lose face."* Saul was broken over the *consequences* of his sin, but he was entirely unrepentant over the *reality* of his sin. He wanted to use God to save his career.
- When David is caught in his horrific crimes, he has no audience. He doesn't offer a single excuse. He writes entire psalms of agony, crying out, *"Against You, and You only, I have sinned."* He doesn't beg to keep his reputation or his throne. Instead, he begs for one thing: *"Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me."*
- Saul was terrified of losing his power; David was terrified of losing his God.
- The Holy Spirit sees what we cannot and responds accordingly.
- This turns out to be good news for David, but bad news for Saul, which brings me to my second point.

2. Where the Spirit is Absent, Darkness Invades

- Verse 14 of [1 Samuel 16](#) is arguably one of the most terrifying sentences in all of Scripture.
- Depending on the translation you have in front of you, the bible states that "an evil / harmful / injurious / distressing spirit from the Lord troubled / tormented / terrorised Saul."
- Now, some scholars have felt the need to protect God's reputation and exonerate Him.
- They perform theological gymnastics to soften the blow. They say,

- “Well, God cannot be the author of anything evil and so the spirit was “sent” in the sense that God *permitted* it to influence Saul. That is, the sending was passive in nature, not active.
- “Well, maybe it wasn't an actual evil spirit; maybe it was just a good angel on a bad errand.”
- But these arguments are ludicrous.
- The Hebrew language is clearly describing an evil, harmful, wicked, contemptible, reprobate spirit.
- Further, the fact that God uses evil spirits to do His bidding is a consistent biblical pattern. Just like God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem in [Judges 9](#), or actively authorised a lying spirit in the vision of Micaiah in [1 Kings 22](#), this text is showing us the absolute sovereignty of God.
- I like what Robert Bergen writes in the NAC: “This was a supernatural assault by an evil being sent at the Lord's direct command. Saul's tortured state was not an accident of nature, nor was it a medical condition. It was a literal, terrifying act of divine judgment in response to his stubborn rebellion.”
- Not only does God send this tormenting Spirit; it returns again and again (16:23; 18:10; 19:9), such that it becomes quite obvious that his mental and psychological problems are inextricably tied to this evil spirit, which plagued him for the rest of his life.
- Now, before we move on, I would like to draw your attention to another word that I believe is used very deliberately to describe the spiritual reality surrounding Saul in 1 Samuel.
- Back in chapter 10, before he arrives in Gibeah to make his first blunder, Saul comes across a band of prophets who are coming down from the high place

with harps, tambourines, flutes and lyres in hand, prophesying. The text says that the Holy Spirit *rushed* upon Saul. The Hebrew word is *tsalach*.

- It means to forcefully break through, to invade a territory.
- This not a gentle falling or descending. This a rushing upon with great power and effectiveness.
- Like the 70 Elders, when this happens, Saul prophesies, as a validation of his selection.
- The implication is that the Spirit empowered Saul for the task of serving as king. He was given the gift of governance, of wisdom and prudence in civil matters, and a spirit of fortitude and courage.
- However, fast forward to [1 Samuel 18:10](#), and the activity of this evil spirit from God is described using the same language. This distressing, evil spirit rushed upon Saul, and the consequence is that he went stark raving mad.
- What is your point? Well, my point is this:
 - Where the Spirit of the Lord is absent, darkness invades.
 - Where the Spirit of the Lord is absent, the devils are at play!
- Saul spent his entire kingship pushing back against the authority of Yahweh, demanding to rule on his own terms. So God finally executed judgment: He withdrew His Holy Spirit, and sent a demonic spirit to torment him.
- Friends, God is not playing games. This stuff is real and we had best sit up and pay attention!
- This passage should terrify us.
- But at the same time, we need to give attention to how the chapter ends

- Because even in the middle of this dark judgment, God provides an opportunity for grace.
- Whenever this evil spirit came upon Saul, David would take up his lyre and begin to play. And the text says Saul would become refreshed and well, and the evil spirit would depart.
- Now, this wasn't just ancient music therapy to soothe an anxious mind.
- David was already standing right there in the room as Saul's armour-bearer, yet his mere presence didn't drive the demon away. The shift happens specifically when his fingers touch the strings.
- Throughout Scripture, we see a powerful correlation between Spirit-inspired music and the moving of God. When the prophets came down from the high place in chapter 10, they marched with harps and lyres. When Elisha needed to hear from God in 2 Kings, he called for a musician, and as the music played, the hand of the Lord came upon him.
- This music was a conduit. The Holy Spirit literally imbued those auditory signals—those physical sound waves moving through the air—with divine power.
- The music became the tangible medium the Holy Spirit used to touch Saul's mind, temporarily displacing the oppressive spirit.
- David didn't change the room; the Holy Spirit used the instrument as a literal channel of grace.
- Even under the weight of judgment, God was reaching out to him, showing him that restoration and refreshment were available if he would only humble himself and repent.

Conclusion

- So, friends, what are the implications of this ancient story of two kings for us sitting here today?
- I fear that for many of us modern conservative believers, there is a tendency to give attention to a passage like this and then shrug it off as just another bible story and get on with our day.
- But this is not just a story!
- Saul was a real person and this account sheds light on real spiritual realities which we, for the most part, simply ignore. We live as though they do not exist.
- Even for those of us who take the narrative seriously, there is the risk of shrugging it off as irrelevant.
- We might look at this account and think,
- *"This is interesting, but the mechanics don't translate. The Holy Spirit came and went on Old Testament figures, but as New Testament believers, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit dwells in us permanently. He will never leave us."*
- And that is absolutely true. The dynamics have shifted, but the underlying principle remains the same.
- What do I mean by that?
- I want you to notice that there is a nuance in the text:
 - This distressing spirit came and went.
 - Saul was not *possessed* by this darkness; he was *oppressed* by it.
- And that principle still applies directly to us today.

- As Christians, you and I cannot be possessed by darkness—the Holy Spirit and a demon cannot occupy the same temple. But we can absolutely be oppressed when we choose the path of Saul.
- Habitual, self-reliant sin grieves the Spirit of God and renders us vulnerable to oppression.
- I am not a mental health practitioner but I find it interesting that there is a direct correlation between the activity of this evil spirit and Saul’s various expressions of mental disorder. He *raved*!
- Why is it that in this modern age, with all the advances of medicine, we still find ourselves living with paralysing anxiety, chronic insecurity, explosive anger, and a deep, haunting paranoia?
- If these things are not real and if there isn’t a very real risk, why does Paul write to the church in Ephesus, telling them to out on the whole armour of God, so that they may withstand the schemes of the devil?
- As we come to the table today, we are reminded that the only solution is true repentance.
- Friends, be quick to adopt the posture of David, who would beat his breast, fall on his face before a holy God, crying out for mercy, and pleading,
- “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me!”