

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue our sermon series titled, □ “Making a Difference in a Nation Adrift.” It is a study through the book of 1 Samuel.

Last week, we studied □ 1 Samuel 16:1-13. The big idea drawn from that text was: □ God sees what we cannot, so we live by faith, not by sight.

We saw this idea played out in the life of the prophet and priest named Samuel, who could not see what God was up to. But God gave us the biblical account of Samuel’s life so that we can see in retrospect what Samuel could not see in real time: that God was at work for good in his life in unseen ways. Through Scripture and the unfolding of history, God pulls back the curtain to reveal to us his good work that Samuel could not see.

Our biblical text for today is □ 1 Samuel chapter 16:14-23. This text reflects the very same big idea: □ God sees what we cannot, so we live by faith, not by sight.

But the biblical characters are different and so is the situation.

From our text today, we’re going to see how God sovereignly takes something that seems unsettlingly bad and orchestrates it into something exceedingly good.

But nobody could see it in real time.

This is relevant for us because sometimes it seems like God brings bad things into our lives. And the reasons are not always clear. The pain, on the other hand, is obvious. When the pain is obvious and the purpose is

not, it can be an invitation to disillusionment and doubting the goodness of God.

Last week, we saw Samuel locate and anoint young David who will be the next king of Israel. In □ 1 Samuel 16:13, the last verse of our text from last week, it says,

ESV 1 Samuel 16:13 . . . And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David . . .

Having anointed David, Samuel passes from the scene, which now shifts to king Saul. The first part of □ verse 14 says,

ESV 1 Samuel 16:14 Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul . . .

Notice the transition of power. The Spirit of the Lord departs from king Saul, who will lose his kingship. And the Spirit rushes upon David, who will gain the crown.

The work of the Spirit here has to do with the gain or loss of spiritual authority and power to be king. It has nothing to do with the gain or loss of eternal salvation.

Saul now becomes the lame duck king, stripped of his spiritual authority and power. David becomes the new king in waiting, now outfitted with the Spirit who will prepare David for the throne.

Who sees this spiritual transfer of power happening in real time?

Nobody. Nobody but God.

To be sure, there will eventually be evidence of this transfer. But this initial work of the Spirit is unseen.

By the way, as a side bar, the Spirit's empowerment for serving as king sheds light on a familiar part of a famous psalm. It is a psalm of remorse and repentance that would be written years later by king David in the aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba. In □ Psalm 51:11 a contrite David prays to God,

ESV Psalm 51:11 . . . take not your Holy Spirit from me.

For many years, that part made me uncomfortable. Could God take his Spirit from me? And if he did, am I doomed?

But David is not pleading with the Lord to spare him from hell. Rather, he is simply begging the Lord not to disqualify him from being the king of Israel as Saul had been disqualified.¹

That makes more sense to me now.

Back in our text, something else happens to Saul that is more unsettling. Not only does the Spirit of the Lord depart from Saul, but the last part of □ verse 14 also says,

ESV 1 Samuel 16:14 . . . and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him.

This makes us squirm. Especially when you consider some other English translations of this verse, such as □ the *New American Standard*, which says,

¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 426.

NAU 1 Samuel 16:14 . . . and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him.

That sounds even worse. The original Hebrew word translated “harmful” or “evil” may be taken in a non-moral or moral sense, depending on the context. Something can be harmful without necessarily being morally evil.

In commenting on this verse, one noted Bible scholar explains, “The Hebrew word translated “evil” (Hb. *rā’â*) has a wide range of meanings from ‘misery’ to ‘moral perverseness.’ Thus, it is possible—and perhaps preferable—to interpret the text not to mean that the Lord sent a morally corrupt demon but rather another sort of supernatural being—an angel of judgment (cf. 2 Kgs 19:35)—against Saul that caused him to experience constant misery.”²

This happens to be the only time in the entire Old Testament that a person is said to be tormented by a harmful or evil spirit.³ In addition, the original Hebrew grammatical structure for this last part of verse 14 is so unusual that it draws attention to what is being said.⁴ It is as if the author wants this verse to stand out.

And it does. It hits us right between the eyes.

There is no getting around the troubling notion that the Lord himself is seeing to it that a harmful spirit torments Saul. The original Hebrew word translated “tormented” means to be gripped by fear, to be terrorized or frightened.⁵

² Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, Vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 182. See also Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 427.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵ HALOT.

God seems to be behind the mental and psychological problems that will plague Saul for the rest of his life.⁶

Why would a good God do such a thing?

Other parts of Scripture reveal that, sometimes God uses bad things for good purposes. For example, the crucifixion of Christ was perpetrated by bad actors, but God used it for our good.

In the story of our text, the immediately preceding context makes clear at least one purpose of Saul's torment. We have learned in recent weeks how Saul has been repeatedly disobedient to the Lord. Saul has continually forsaken the Lord in pursuit of his own selfish agendas. Saul has recurrently lived by sight and not by faith.

So, Saul had it coming. This is a just punishment he deserves.

The broader context of Scripture also sheds light. As part of the Mosaic Covenant, God had long before made a deal with the people of Israel through Moses. In effect, God said, "If you obey me, I will bless you. But if you disobey me, I will curse you. Follow me and life will be good; rebel against me and life will be miserable."

In sending the spirit of torment to Saul, the Lord was simply being faithful to his promise in the Mosaic Covenant. Even Saul's servants may have recognized this, as reflected in □ verse 15.

ESV 1 Samuel 16:15 And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you."

⁶ Ronald F. Youngblood, "1, 2 Samuel" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 Samuel–2 Kings (Revised Edition)*, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 171.

How do they know that the source of Saul's torment is a harmful spirit from God? It may simply reflect their comprehensive theological view of the sovereignty of God. Or perhaps more likely, they connect the dots based on their understanding of the Mosaic Covenant and Saul's disobedience.

Let me be quick to dispel any notion that all problems we experience are a judgment from God. That is not what I am saying, nor is it what this text suggests. Some problems have nothing whatsoever to do with personal sin.

But in Saul's case, the biblical author wants us to see the connection between Saul's waywardness and the negative consequences he experiences. It is a needful deterrent for all of us.

As believers today, we are not bound by the Mosaic Covenant. That was between God and the Israelites. We are not a party to that deal.

Nevertheless, our heavenly Father still disciplines his children for our own good. Hebrews □ 12:6 tells us,

ESV Hebrews 12:6 "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

Then a little later, a reason is given in □ Hebrews 12:10-11.

ESV Hebrews 12:10 . . . he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Sadly, Saul never seems to learn or be genuinely repentant. But we can respond differently, knowing that the Lord's discipline is not to even the score, but to train our souls.

As is often the case, there is more going on here than meets the eye. The next part of our story begins to reveal that God is sovereignly working out a number of unseen purposes connected to Saul's torment. In verse 16, Saul's servants provide the following advice.

ESV 1 Samuel 16:16 "Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well."

Saul's servants prescribe some music to soothe Saul's soul. They invite Saul to authorize a search for a musician who can play the lyre, a musical instrument with strings and a wooden frame.⁷

This suggestion implies that Saul is not tormented constantly, but only periodically. The proposed musician would play during the periods of torment to provide some relief.

Saul thinks it is a good idea, as indicated in verse 17.

ESV 1 Samuel 16:17 So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me."

One of the servants already has somebody in mind. In verse 18 he says, "What about Wes Crenshaw? That dude has the chops."

⁷ TWOT.

But this is a variant reading. Most translations don't render it that way. Verse □ 18 actually says,

ESV 1 Samuel 16:18 One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him."

Clearly, the servant has David in mind. It seems that enough time has passed since David's anointing that David's reputation is growing.⁸ It is becoming increasingly clear that the Spirit of the Lord has indeed rushed upon him. The most telling description of David is, □ "the Lord is with him." This is particularly ironic coming from the lips of Saul's servant. The Lord is with David, but not with Saul.

The irony is lost on Saul, who does not know that David will be the next king. For that matter, neither does David. Saul brings David into the royal court, as explained in □ verses 19 through 23.

ESV 1 Samuel 16:19 Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me David your son, who is with the sheep."

□ ESV 1 Samuel 16:20 And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 16:21 And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer.

⁸ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 240.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 16:22 And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 16:23 And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

We can see in retrospect what no one in the story can see in real time; namely, that God has used Saul’s torment to bring David into the royal court. This is not a coincidence. God is sovereignly orchestrating the whole thing. And by his grace, God brings David, not only to begin his preparation for the throne, but also to provide some relief for Saul.

God brings the reproof *and* the relief.

Nobody can see what God is doing real time. Saul is clueless. And so is David.

In fact, we are left to wonder what David may be thinking at this point. He had been previously anointed by Samuel, presumably for some important future assignment from God. But Samuel disclosed no specifics.

We know that David’s assignment is to be king. But David doesn’t know that yet.

As time passed since his anointing, it is reasonable to believe that David returned to shepherding the family flock, watching, waiting, and wondering. What am I supposed to do? What is my assignment for which I was anointed?

Then comes the strange instruction from his father to pack up and go play music for the tormented king. David may have been wondering if this is the assignment for which he was anointed, especially when the king decides to employ him full time because he is so effective.

I imagine playing before the king was just the most conspicuous part of David's job. Behind the scenes, he must have been writing and practicing songs. Specifically, he was writing songs that would calm the fears of the king who was tormented by fits of terror.

I don't know for sure, but it would certainly be understandable if, at some point, David began to wonder, "Is this it? Is this my calling for which I was anointed: to write and play songs to calm the fears of a rejected king who is mentally disturbed?"

It was probably not what every Jewish boy dreamed of. Some might even call it a dead-end job.

But God sees what David cannot. This is a part of David's training that would eventually culminate in the writing of some of the greatest songs of all time—songs that have helped countless people tormented with fear and anxiety.

Here's one you may have heard of. It is played on a lyre—David's go-to instrument. It goes like this.

□ [Play song here]

Do you recognize it?

It may be easier to identify if I translate the lyrics from ancient Hebrew to modern English. It goes like this.

□ ESV Psalm 23:1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. □ 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. □ 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. □ 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. □ 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. □ 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

We can trace the seeds of this song all the way back to the harmful spirit from the Lord that tormented Saul. Saul's torment created the need for David to be immersed in songwriting to calm him. And this immersion in songwriting for the fearful equipped David to write Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is one of at least 73 psalms in Scriptures written by David.

God sees what David cannot. Something good from something bad.

This brings us back to the big idea: □ God sees what we cannot, so we live by faith, not by sight.

How many people have been helped by David's song, which was the culmination of his internship with Saul, who was tormented by the harmful spirit?

I am certainly one.

God saw my nights about ten years ago when I was tormented by fits of anxiety. Some people call them panic attacks.

I have always been vulnerable to anxiety, but about ten years ago, I experienced a perfect circumstantial storm in which the embers of my anxiety were fanned into flame.

In my darkest moments, in the wee hours of the morning, when terror crept in like a fog, the only thing I seemed to be able to do was mouth the words, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” And it was the only thing that brought me some refreshment.

It is mind-boggling to think that, in God’s infinite knowledge, love, and sovereignty, when he decided to discipline Saul with the harmful spirit 3,000 years ago, among the Lord’s innumerable deliberations about countless people and scenarios, there was one small thought unseen: “This is going to help Bob.”

Not because I am special. But because I am his. And he is incredibly gracious.

Ripples from every divine initiative emanate in all directions, affecting all manner of people in unseen ways—all according to his good plan.

I would not want to repeat that dark season of my soul. But neither would I exchange it. Because I think I am better for it. In that season, God performed some surgery on my soul, removing a portion of the spiritual malignancies I share with Saul, including some stubborn, prideful self-sufficiency.

To the extent that I may now be more humbly dependent on the Lord in my weakness, and to the extent that I am thereby a little less of a pastoral dunce than I used to be, you are the beneficiaries. So, even you have reason to give thanks for the unsettlingly bad thing that happened to Saul.

Indeed, God does work all things together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). All things include a harmful spirit from the Lord 3,000 years ago. In God's economy, that bad thing continues to yield good things, not all of which we can see.

God sees what we cannot, so we live by faith, not by sight.

Let's pray. Lord, when all we see is torment, when all we feel is pain, help us to trust in your unseen purposes which are always consistent with your character: utterly good, entirely just, and supremely loving. Amen.