

Whose Kingdom?

1 Samuel 18:1-20:42

How does God work? How do you expect God to work? Where do you think you see God working? Many people only think of God working in terms of the miraculous.

- God piles up the Red Sea for the Israelites to walk through – that's God at work.
- God has some widow keep pouring oil out of her jar and it doesn't run out – that's God doing His thing.
- Jesus walking on water – God's working there.
- Jesus telling a crippled person to get up and walk – that looks pretty much like God.

Even the story we looked at last week – David beating Goliath – that has a certain God-touch to it.

And so, if you ask them whether they see God working in their own lives, they're likely to say "no".

- My car runs out of petrol if I don't keep filling it up.
- When I break a bone, I need a doctor to fix it.
- I pray for a trouble-free life, but I keep running into problems and difficulties.
- My life looks pretty ordinary – nothing in the last 30 years I could really call a miracle.

But is that the only time God works – when He steps in with an obvious miracle to fix up some mess? If I can't point to any miracles, does that mean God's not active? Perhaps even that God doesn't care for me? I wonder if David ever pondered those sorts of things as he went through the events of these three chapters.

The Expectations

What are your expectations as you come to chapter 18?

When you read the book of Judges, you know what's coming next. The writer gives you this cycle or pattern at the beginning of the book:

- Israel forsakes God.
- God hands Israel over to her enemies.
- The people cry out to God for help.
- God provides a judge – a saviour.
- Israel lives in peace while the judge lives.

Then the cycle starts all over again. It's the same basic story each time.

The books of Samuel follow on from that period. The one big difference is Israel's demand for a king like the nations. God gives them the king they ask for – Saul. We're told how that happens.

- First, Samuel anoints Saul privately.
- Then there's the public choosing of Saul.
- Then Saul demonstrates his leadership with a great victory over the Ammonites.

He's firmly in place as king. But then Saul fails.

- In chapter 13, he doesn't wait for Samuel as God told him to.
- In chapter 15, he doesn't wipe out the Amalekites and their livestock as God told him to.

He despised God's word. He failed to obey. And so God rejects him as king. God says He'll give the kingdom to Saul's neighbour – to one who'll pay attention to God.

Then, in chapter 16, Samuel anoints God's chosen king – David. That's followed in chapter 17 by the great victory over the Philistines – a victory God gives Israel through David. So, what do we expect when we turn to chapter 18? Shouldn't we expect to see David recognised as king – ruling over God's people and leading them to victory

over their enemies? That's the pattern isn't it? That's how we expect God to act. But the pattern breaks down.

At one level, it's still there. Look at 18:13-14

So he [Saul] sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. In everything he did he had great success, because the LORD was with him.

David leads the people in battle against their enemies. God gives David success. But he's not actually on the throne. He's not recognised as king. And he has to wait a long time and go through many difficulties before he gets to that point.

Why? Is God not able to keep His promise? Does God not care for David? Is maybe God occupied somewhere else – distracted for a few years? I'm not sure the text gives us a direct answer to the "why" – but it does show us some of the wrong answers. And it affirms strongly that God's quite active in what's going on.

The Threats

The big tension in these chapters is Saul's increasing opposition to David. That opposition is so severe, it leads Saul to attempt murder. But it's not the opposition that we meet first. First, we meet positive responses to God's anointed king.

- In verses 1 to 4, the positive response comes from Saul's son – Jonathan. He becomes friends with David. He makes a covenant with David. He even submits to David.
- In verse 5, Saul himself responds positively. He gives David a high rank in the army.
- In verse 5, we also see a positive response from the

officers in the army and all the people. God is with David. God gives David success in what he does. People are positive about it. This is the sort of thing we expect. David could affirm: God is working His purpose out. God's fulfilling His promise.

It even goes beyond our expectations. Jonathan, the crown prince, voluntarily gives David his robe, his sword, his bow and his belt. This is highly unusual. It's more than a gift between friends. The robe is the badge of Jonathan's rank. The military equipment was a gift of considerable value – given what we're told of the rarity of such equipment in Israel in 13:22. Jonathan acknowledges Israel's next king – and submits himself to him.

The turning point comes with the women's singing in verse 7:

*Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands.*

That gets under Saul's skin. Verse 8:

Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

The irony is: David already has the kingdom. He's God's anointed – and God keeps his promises. But Saul doesn't know about the anointing.

Yet, Saul does see David as a rival. He's a hero. He's popular. He's getting star-billing in the latest songs. Saul no longer gets the appropriate honour he deserves as king. And he's worried for his son. God's already told him his dynasty's finished – but when's he really paid

attention to God? It's certainly not going to stop him doing everything in his power to ensure Jonathan follows him as king. So, he takes steps to eliminate this rival. Have a quick run through the eight steps in these three chapters.

Step #1 (18:10-11): throw a spear at him – not just once, but twice. When I read "pin him to the wall", I usually think: That'd be pretty good aim – be accurate enough to immobilise him without harming him. But "pin him to the wall" is just a polite way of saying "kill him". Saul's intention isn't to pin him via his clothes, but via his vital organs.

Some wonder why David came back after the first time. Why give Saul a second shot? Remember David's job description – it's to help with Saul's mood swings. The king's got psychological issues. That's why you're playing your harp. You knew it was a dangerous job when you took it on – that's just part of the territory. But don't be paranoid and take it personally.

Step #1 fails. So, step #2 (18:17): marry him off to a daughter. This may be to do with the promised reward for whoever killed Goliath – it's not totally clear. What is made clear for us is Saul's motive: he thinks this will bring David into more contact with the Philistines and so increase his odds of being killed. Exactly how it will bring him into greater contact with the Philistines, we're not sure.

- Maybe being the king's son-in-law would make him a special target in the eyes of the Philistines – though one would think being the destroyer of Goliath already made him a big enough target.

- Maybe being the king's son-in-law gave the king that extra bit of authority over him – send him on the dangerous, secret missions that he couldn't entrust to anyone else.

Whatever it is, the plan fails. David's not interested in marrying Merab.

Step #3 is a variation on step 2: iron out the kinks in step 2 and try with the next daughter. David's worried about his humble origins – his unworthiness to be the king's son-in-law. Saul's got a way round that. Forget about the monetary dowry – get me a dowry of Philistines instead. 100 should be about right for a princess. It also should be enough to make sure one of them can eliminate David.

Step #4 is at the beginning of chapter 19. Subtlety hasn't worked to well. Let's try the direct approach. He simply tells Jonathan and his inner circle to kill David. There's got to be some perks in being king – simply order others to do your dirty work for you.

Step #5 (19:9): repeat step 1. Maybe Saul practised his aim in the meantime. Maybe he thought David's reflexes had slowed. Maybe he didn't think.

Step #6 (19:11): send some soldiers to kill him at home when he gets up in the morning.

Step #7 (19:20): send some soldiers to arrest him. When that doesn't work, try again. When that doesn't work, try yet again. When that doesn't work, go and do it yourself.

Step #8 (20): wait for David to turn up to the New Moon festival and kill him there. If you can't go to him and

capture him, maybe you can wait for circumstances to simply bring him to you.

Now I haven't gone through the details of all those steps – you can read those for yourselves. I wanted you to get a feel for the number of times Saul tries to kill David in these three chapters. It's time after time after time. And we haven't got to the end yet – more attempts will follow in the coming chapters. It's by looking at a big chunk of the Bible together like this that we see just how often Saul tried. It's something of an obsession. David faces some fairly serious opposition here – and it's ongoing.

What underlies it all? The narrator gives us several insights. We've already read 18:8-9. It speaks of Saul's anger and Saul's jealousy. Jealousy's a terrible master. It blinds people's minds. It clouds their judgment. It results in them acting irrationally. And that's what we see with Saul. David hasn't harmed him. David's not trying to kill him. On the contrary, David's been a loyal soldier and won great victories for Saul.

The narrator also highlights Saul's fear – 18:12

Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had left Saul.

Look also at verse 15:

When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him.

And verse 28:

When Saul realized that the LORD was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days.

Doesn't that strike you as a bit strange? Saul's got the

authority. He sits in the position of power. He's giving orders for David's death. And yet he's the one afraid. Why?

- Is he afraid of David's strength – that David will turn against him and assassinate him?
- Is he afraid of David's popularity – that David will lead a popular uprising against his kingship?
- Is it simply the fear of paranoia?

The text seems to link the fear with Saul's recognition that God's with David. God's Spirit's been taken from Saul – and now empowers David. There's good reason for Saul to be afraid. But his fear leads to an irrational response – he fights against God's chosen one and thus against God. And who in their right mind would pick a fight with God? Yet, we all do it all the time. That's what sin is – picking a fight with the invincible God who will ultimately crush all sin. Saul continues to refuse to submit to God's word.

Another factor the narrator tells us about is this evil spirit from God in 18:10 and 19:9. This is part of God's just judgment on Saul because Saul despised God's word and refused to obey God's commands. The sense of the word *evil* in this context is not necessarily moral – rather a spirit that brings pain and distress; a spirit that reminds Saul that he's forfeited God's presence with him through his own rebellion. Yet, instead of repenting and seeking God's mercy, Saul moves into deeper opposition to God. And all the while, he continues the proper religious festivals.

The Deliverance

As Saul works his way through all these plots and plans, what's happening with David? Clearly, David's not killed

– otherwise we wouldn't have any new plots and plans. But look at the reasons he's not killed.

- Plot 1: he evades the spear – he does that twice.
- Plot 2: he refuses to marry Merab, Saul's daughter.
- Plot 3: he kills 200 Philistines – double the number asked for by Saul – and not one of them kills David.
- Plot 4: Jonathan talks Saul out of it. He calmly explains to Saul that David's one of the good guys and Saul should be grateful he's on Israel's side.
- Plot 5: he evades the spear again – and then flees the court.
- Plot 6: Saul's daughter Michal warns David, helps him escape and then buys him some time with some sneaky arrangement of the furniture.
- Plot 7: God's Spirit stops each group of soldiers and then Saul from laying their hands on David.
- Plot 8: Jonathan warns David and helps him escape.

Now, what do you make of all those escapes. I suspect most of them look pretty ordinary to us. There's only one where it's crystal-clear that God intervenes – that God takes some direct action to protect David. When God's Spirit comes on the soldiers and they start prophesying instead of arresting David, it's pretty clear God's intervened and rescued him. That's got the element of the miraculous about it.

But does that mean God didn't do anything in relation to all the other plots? Three things. First, even though we may classify something as ordinary, it doesn't mean God's not involved. God's sovereignty is far greater than our imaginations. It includes everything. He's quite capable of orchestrating what we consider the ordinary, everyday circumstances of our lives to achieve His purposes. On

the odd occasion, He announces what He's doing with the equivalent of a trumpet blast – sends a prophet to tell us beforehand or does something out of the ordinary. But, on most occasions, He simply oversees the weaving of the tapestry of everyday events so it forms the picture He planned from the beginning.

Secondly, when you think of the three chapters as a whole, it's obvious God's working for David. Sure, you can explain each individual escape as an ordinary sort of thing – but when you put them all together, it's no longer ordinary. You've got the king – the one wielding power and authority in Israel. And he's absolutely determined to get rid of David. And he puts all these plots and schemes into action – one after the other. Humanly speaking, what's the chance that none of these plots succeed? What odds would the bookmakers give you?

Thirdly, when you stop and think about some of the escapes, they're not really all that ordinary. Take the first plot, for example. Saul's an accomplished warrior. He knows how to throw a spear. He's throwing this spear under fairly ideal conditions. He's in the same room as David. David's concentrating on his harp. How likely is it that he'd miss – and miss a second time?

Or what about Jonathan intervening on David's behalf? This isn't our modern Western culture where we see even children acting independently of and against their parents. This is the ancient Middle East where respect for parents and obeying parents was the way of life. And more than that, Jonathan's the crown prince. It was usual in those days for newly crowned kings to execute all potential rivals to the throne. Have a read through 1 and 2 Kings

and you'll see it happening often enough. Jonathan, when he takes up David's cause with his father, argues against all that culture and tradition.

The narrator tells us that the Lord was with David. Three times we read it in chapter 18 – verses 12, 14 and 28. Yet even without those statements, the actual narrative demonstrates it time and time again.

And so, if we come back to the question: Why does David have to wait for the throne? Why does he have to go through all these difficulties? We can get rid of some answers.

- It's not because God's lost control or is too busy elsewhere. God's very involved in what's happening here.
- It's not because God doesn't care about David. David is His choice as king. And God continues to deliver David time and time again. God is at work in David's life.

The Purpose

I don't think we find the answer within these chapters – and not even within 1 Samuel. What 1 Samuel affirms for us is that being God's anointed doesn't mean you avoid trials and sufferings and difficulties. These things may still come.

- It doesn't mean God's doesn't care.
- It doesn't mean you've done anything wrong.

I think we move towards the answer in Psalm 2.

*Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?*

The kings of the earth take their stand

*and the rulers gather together
against the LORD*

and against his Anointed One.

*"Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."*

The expectation is that the kings of this earth will rebel against God and against God's King – God's anointed one or God's Messiah. This is not how it should be. We should see a world where everyone submits perfectly to their Creator – whether they be a king or an average, everyday person. But we don't live in an ideal world. We live in a world damaged by human sin. We live in a world where humans try to throw off God's rule – and the rule of God's anointed king. David experienced this first hand.

But David also experienced this as the forerunner of God's ultimate Anointed One – namely, Jesus. David's experiences point forward – to the real King who comes as David's great descendant. As Jesus walks the pages of the gospels, what do we see?

- His family considers Him mad.
- The scribes say He blasphemes.
- Leaders claim He uses the power of Satan.
- Crowds take up stones to kill Him.
- Factions plot together to execute Him.
- A disciple arranges to betray Him.

Until finally, they all get together and hand Him over to Gentile authorities so He can be mocked and beaten and crucified.

Jesus taught His disciples that He must suffer. Where did He find this idea? He finds it in the Suffering Servant songs of Isaiah. He finds it in the Psalms. And He finds

it in the life of David. Jesus is God's anointed King – but the way He comes into His kingdom is through suffering and rejection and death.

At that point, He goes beyond David – for God continued to rescue David from Saul's hands so that he didn't die – not until the end of his reign. God also saves Jesus – not from death, but through death. It's in Jesus' death that He establishes His kingdom.

- His death pays for our sins.
- His death brings forgiveness for His people.
- His death purchases eternal life for us.
- His death provides salvation for His subjects.

And God doesn't simply abandon Him to death. He raises Him from the dead to rule in glory and power for all eternity.

But we don't see that yet – not in its completeness. That will come, but we're not there yet. We still live in a world where the kings and rulers plot to throw off the rule of God and His Anointed King. And it's not just the rulers – the peoples of this earth join them in their plots. They too don't want to submit to God and His King. What should we expect in such a world? And what should we expect of God?

First, we can expect a world that rejects God and His King to also reject God's people. Jesus made that plain. The rest of the New Testament makes it plain. Those who join themselves to God's Anointed One will face difficulties and hardships and persecutions. It's not a sign of God's forgetfulness or of His impotence. It doesn't indicate God's anger or lack of care. It's simply the usual expectation at the current time.

Secondly, we can rely on God's promised deliverance – not because we have the same promise as David; we don't. We have a greater promise that comes through David's greater Son. We have the promise of deliverance from sin and suffering and death.

- Not the promise that we won't still sin now or suffer now or physically die;
- But the promise that we'll enter Jesus' eternal kingdom where there is no sin or suffering or death.

And God's guaranteed that. Nothing can separate us from that – not even physical death.