

Introduction

What is it like to see your personal world collapse around you? Your business is failing; your health is declining. Worst of all, the love and respect of all those around you, including your very children, are transferred to your rival. You feel alone, abandoned. What then do you do? You ask yourself how this nightmare came to be. And when you do, do you have the courage to look into your very heart?

If Shakespeare had written the Tragedy of King Saul, our text would have been placed in Act III, where the climax comes. In this act, Saul reaches a decisive moment. He sees that his world is collapsing around him and that he is powerless to stop it. He must choose what course to take in response, a decision that will lead to his ultimate tragic fate.

Text

Verses 1–4 presents the loving adoration of Saul’s son for David. It cannot be stronger. Jonathan loves David “as his own soul.” He gives to David his weapons and honored clothing; in essence, he saying, “All that I have and am, I commit to you.” One commentator notes that Jonathan sees in David a kindred spirit. Like Jonathan, who had demonstrated his fighting merit in his battles against the Philistines, so David proved his. But Jonathan sees more than a kindred spirit; he sees his superior. As brave as he was, Jonathan had not challenged Goliath. He no doubt sees in David what was lacking in his own father. David is not old enough to be a father-figure to Jonathan, but he becomes for Jonathan that brother to whom he can look up to.

Next comes the shift of the people’s devotion from Saul to David. Give Saul credit in enlisting David as a leader in his army out of recognition of David’s ability. But he is taken aback by what entails. David’s military success is now winning fame and adoration of the people who in their songs compare him favorably against Saul. Verse 5 notes that it was not only the people infatuated with David, but even Saul’s servants admired him.

Jonathan’s devotion to David might have escaped Saul’s notice, but a public song sung in Saul’s presence is too much to ignore. It is at this juncture that Saul turns against his star military servant, recognizing that David has now become his rival.

Let’s pause here to grasp the depth of the change in Saul’s attitude. Back in chapter 16, we read of David first coming into Saul’s service. Saul is mentally tormented by a “harmful spirit from the Lord” (v. 14). David is recruited, not as a soldier but as a musician, to sooth Saul with his playing of the lyre. And it worked. Whenever the spirit troubled Saul, David played his lyre and drove the troubling spirit away. The result was that “Saul loved him greatly” (v. 21). Saul loved David, both for David’s personal ministry to him and for David’s prowess as a military champion. Remember back in chapter 14 we are told that “when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he attached him to himself” (v. 52). Saul loved David. Now that love is turning to jealousy and ultimately to hate.

Next follows the love of his daughter for David. Saul had reneged on his promise to give his first daughter Merab to David as a wife. When he learns that his second daughter Michal loves David, he is pleased, not because his daughter should love such a fine man but because he can make her a tool to kill his rival. The scheme fails, and Saul ends up having to give to his rival his daughter, whom once again we are told loves.

And then there is the final note at the end of the chapter, what had to be a twisting of the knife into the jealous heart of Saul, that through his ongoing military success David's "name was highly esteemed."

We end with the sad figure of a man losing the love and admiration of all those around him, losing love to the new star in town. But remember what was said earlier about a Shakespearean tragedy. The hero makes a decision that will determine his downfall. Saul's decision is recorded in verses 28–29: "But when Saul saw and knew that the Lord was with David, and that Michal, Saul's daughter, loved him, Saul was even more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy continually." Even as Saul knows that the Lord favored David, he nevertheless chooses to be David's enemy.

Lessons

I feel sorry for Saul, truly one of the great tragic figures of the Bible. He was placed on a throne he was not equipped to sit upon. He was given the responsibility to fight the battles of his people against foes stronger than Israel, a responsibility that he did his best to fulfill, but, again, he lacked the innate qualities of the leadership needed. Any personality test given before his reign would have predicted his present dilemma. Saul just didn't have what it takes. Now comes along a young man bursting with all the qualities of leadership, a man who is handsome and capable. He is the epitome of the charismatic leader. Charisma was never attributed to Saul.

Nor was love. Saul may have been admired when he first won his battles, yet, never is anyone said to love him. Everyone, even Saul for a time, loved David.

Saul is a tragic figure because he also was not an evil figure. He will now cross the line out of his jealousy, but until then he was simply a man in over his head doing the best he could. He did not murder; did not use his position to oppress or to make himself rich. He recognized the military quality of other men. His love for David was an honest love.

And, by the way, he had a true dilemma about what to do. You don't just step down from being king. He had not been hired for the position. Saul was anointed king, meaning that he had been selected by God, as recognized by the people. (We know that David, too, was anointed, but no one else does.) Even David understood this. There will be times later when David has opportunity to kill Saul, but he refrains, for as he says of Saul, "he is the Lord's anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6).

I feel sorry for Saul for all these reasons, and yet, all these reasons are not at the heart of what undid him. Saul's real problem was his heart, for it was not a heart that was after God's own heart. It is this factor that forms the real distinction between Saul and David.

Do you recall the incident in Saul's early years where he is waiting for Samuel to meet him and his troops to offer up a sacrifice before a military occasion? It appears that Samuel will not show up and so Saul makes the sacrifice on his own. Samuel arrives immediately afterwards. He rebukes Saul for not keeping the command of God. He then prophesies that the kingdom will not remain with Saul but that the Lord will seek out (and this is the keynote phrase) "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). David is that man.

What marks such a heart? That is what we want to know, and we will use these two men as our case study.

Is the distinction one of ethical behavior? If so, Saul might actually have an edge over David. Yes, he tried to scheme David's death. David, years later, would do the same thing for the honorable man Uriah, whose wife, Bathsheba, he had impregnated. Surely, that is not displaying the heart of God.

How about being religious? Saul was religious. In both cases in which Samuel lambasts him for disobedience, he was actually making sacrifices to the Lord. In his first victorious battle, he credits the Lord for working salvation in Israel. In the midst of battle, he takes time to consult the priest of the Lord for guidance, erects an altar to the Lord, and provides a means to stop his men from sinning against an eating regulation of the law.

How about repentance for sin? On the second occasion of Samuel rebuking Saul, he confesses: "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord" (15:24-25).

So what is the distinction? What makes for "a man after God's own heart"? The distinction is that of having a heart for God, not merely a heart to win favor before God. Let me repeat: It is having a heart for God, not merely a heart to win favor before God.

Our pastor brought out last week that David alone saw the theological issue at stake in Goliath's defiance of the Israelite army. David alone saw it as a battle not between men but between God and those who would defy him. He saw further that victory would come not because of any warrior's prowess but because God would deliver him and grant victory.

But didn't I just demonstrate how Saul had also attributed victory to the Lord? Wasn't the very actions of building altars and consulting with the high priest testimony to his dependence on the Lord? Sort of. Saul was not a hypocrite, pretending to be religious. He believed in religion and believed in its effectiveness. But here is the real question that exposes Saul's heart: Did Saul love the Lord?

Could Saul have written the words that David wrote that open Psalm 18: “I love you, O Lord, my strength” (Psalm 118:1)? Could he have written the words David wrote in Psalm 36?

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
your judgments are like the great deep;
man and beast you save, O LORD.
How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

I doubt it, not because Saul was not a writer like David but because he could not understand the feelings that moved in David’s heart. It is one thing to be religious; it is another to love God. It is one thing to have a heart to do the right things before God and thus hope to win his favor; it is another to love God for who he is and out of that love then do right things.

Saul acknowledged God; David loved God. Saul repented of sin in order not to lose God’s favor; David, when the time would come for another prophet to expose his sin, would be filled with grief for sinning against the Lord. He recognized that he was not merely a person who occasionally made mistakes, but a sinner through and through who needed his heart to be cleansed. Saul could not have written the words David wrote in Psalm 51:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

But more to the point is that Saul could not understand the grace and mercy of the God he acknowledged. His God was an accountant who tallied up good and bad behavior, then handed out reward and punishment accordingly. That is why Saul was caught up in calculating what to do. “Do I wait? Do I make a sacrifice on my own? Should I consult with the priest? What is the right thing to do?” The poor fellow, more often than not, made the wrong choices.

You can see in David a decisive man because he understands in his heart the issues. “There is a giant pagan defying the army of God? Well, then go fight him. What’s the problem?” David, as we will see, will not always make the right decision himself, but the point is that he understood in his heart the relationship that the Lord desired of his people, which is to love him, which is to trust him, which is to make him the center of their heart.

Making the Lord the center of his heart meant more than putting duty for the Lord first. It meant loving the Lord with all one’s heart. And so, for David, the will of the Lord was not only to be obeyed; it was to take delight in (Ps. 40:8). For the Lord himself is good, is enjoyable. As David recommended: “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” Ps. 34:8.

And so, the issue for each of us and the question that each of us must answer is, Do you love God? Do you take delight in your Lord? Do you understand the joy of knowing your Lord—not intellectually, but in your heart? If not, if you understand the terms but not the emotion, then maybe your problem is that of Simon the Pharisee, who once had invited Jesus for dinner.

We equate the term Pharisee with hypocrite because of Jesus' harsh words towards them, but Jesus was harsh precisely because they were so close to the truth and yet blind to it. They were the religious conservatives of their day who believed in the inerrancy of Scripture and thought the central problem of their nation was that the people drifted from the commandments of God. Their desire was to move people back to obeying God. That, as far as they are concerned, should be the aim of everyone who is of God.

And so, Simon logically concludes that, when a prostitute crashes his dinner party for Jesus and scandalously throws herself at Jesus' feet, Jesus ought to reject her. Instead, Jesus tells a parable.

A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?

After Simon gives the correct answer of the debtor who owed more, Jesus contrasts the reception he had received from Simon when arriving and the attention now being shown by the sinful woman.

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Then Jesus makes the following application:

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little. (cf. Luke 7:36–50)

Do you see Jesus' point? It is not that some people have many sins to be forgiven, while others have few. It is that, when you understand how truly the great debtor you are before your Creator, then deep will be your gratitude for the forgiveness you have received; then great will be the love that you have for your Lord.

David understood that he was sinner saved by God's profound mercy. But not even David understood the cost of God's mercy. How much more delight and love would he have expressed if he had known the love of his Lord shown through the atonement made by our Lord Jesus Christ?

...you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. 1 Peter 1:18–19

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10

How does such knowledge of being a sinner saved by the blood of Jesus Christ impact you? Are you thankful, but then, in the back of your head is the thought that you are not such a bad person? Are you thankful, but then, couldn't God, shouldn't God be merciful anyhow?

It comes back to the heart. You can be a Saul and know the right terminology. You can even believe the right doctrines, and yet, the truth of who you are and what Christ has done for you has not struck home as it did for John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace." He summed up his knowledge this way: "I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior." You can be a Saul, or you can be a David, whose knowledge of God and knowledge of himself led him to worship, to be thankful towards, to love the God who was his Savior.

When you know such love, it will sink into your soul, into your heart. You will taste of the Lord and find that he is good. You will look at the cross and be filled with his praise.