

Three Steps Down

1 Samuel 22

At first, it seemed small and insignificant. Saul simply gave in to fear, refused to wait for Samuel, and offered animal sacrifices himself.

But God can read men's hearts. And He knew Saul had turned his back on the Lord who had called and commissioned him to rule as king.

Then Saul disobeyed again. This time he gave in to greed, hoarded condemned cattle and sheep, and took a bribe to spare the Midian king.

Samuel loved the big man he had anointed as king. Nevertheless, the old prophet faithfully delivered God's message. Saul was rejected as ruler over Israel. God had found someone better: someone who would faithfully honor and obey Him.

At first, Saul did not know David was that man. But when the skinny, young shepherd walked down the hill into the Valley of Elah to face Goliath, Saul watched him.

And somehow he knew. This was the man Samuel spoke of: the man who was appointed to replace him.

That was the beginning of the big man's campaign against David. His tactics were subtle at first. He sent David into the thick of battles, hoping he would be killed.

Then he goaded David into marrying his daughter. He smiled inside when the young couple stood before the priest beneath a canopy. Being the king's son-in-law would put a target on David's back. And he would surely be killed in battle.

But David was not killed. God not only protected the young shepherd. He also gave him stunning success.

After that, Saul's murder plot intensified. He hurled his spear at Jesse's son. He sent murder squads after David. Then he tried to chase the young man down himself.

Each of Saul's decisions took him farther and farther from the God he had praised and worshiped the day Samuel anointed him. Step by step, he descended into the darkness.

And we can see those steps as Saul neared the bottom.

Projection

David had repented and recovered from his panic-driven lies and foolish flight to Gath. But he was still on the run.

Jonathan said it best. Before the young prince left to test his father to know for sure that Saul wanted to kill David, Jonathan told his friend he would return and tell him what he learned.

A secret sign would be hidden in the words he said to the boy who fetched his arrows. At the same time, the prince would tell David what it meant if the murder plot was real.

...if I say to the youth, 'Behold, the arrows are beyond you,' go, for the Lord has sent you away.
1 Samuel 20:22

David knew it was wrong to flee into the arms of Israel's enemies. But he was convinced it was God's will that he flee from Saul. So that is what he did.

So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; Verse 1

Where the rocky plains and sheep pastures of Judah's highland meadows met lion yellow mountains, David found a cave. It was a stone fortress, a safe haven that was easy to defend.

David knew how treacherous Saul was. So he sent someone to fetch his family from Bethlehem. The king was sure to slaughter them if they were not hidden away.

And David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and my mother come and stay with you until I know what God will do for me." Then he left them with the king of Moab; and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. Verses 3-4

At water wells and morning marketplaces, neighbors whispered the news: David was hiding in the mountains. Saul had become so power mad and oppressive, life was almost impossible for some people. And they did more than merely listen to the rumors. They acted upon them.

Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Now there were about four hundred men with him. Verse 2

People who were poor and oppressed or frail and fearful crept up to David's cave. They saw the former shepherd as a savior. And they begged to be allowed to stay with him.

David could have refused, of course. After all, it was all he could do to keep himself safe. But God had not only anointed David to reign; He also gave him both the ability and the desire to rule.

So David refused to sit and sulk over his own troubles. His heart reached out to others who were also in trouble and pleaded for protection.

With stories about David buzzing in every village and at country crossroads, Saul's spies were bound to hear, too. And they did. Then they scurried off to Gibeah to pour the news into Saul's ear.

They told the king how David had hidden himself away in the mountains. And it was rumored that he led an small army now.

Saul still had pagan enemies. The five lords of Philistia still threatened Israel. But the king had no time to fight those who hated his God and oppressed his people. He was too obsessed with capturing and killing the young man God had appointed to take his place.

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. Verse 6

It was supposed to be a council of the king of all Israel. But Saul had no faithful followers outside of his own tribe.

Those Benjamites had grown rich on stolen lands, on confiscated crops and cattle. And Saul was quick to remind them of that.

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?" Verse 7

They dared not refuse to follow their king when he went after David. Saul had favored the men Benjamin, impoverishing the other tribes of Israel to enrich his own.

If David did become king, Saul scolded his captains, where would their riches come from then? David was of the tribe of Judah, not Benjamin. And he would enrich them.

Deep in the devil's darkness, deception twists and warps reality. And so it was with Saul. He assumed David would do just as he had. Saul had bestowed stolen properties upon his neighbors to bribe them into following him.

Surely, he supposed, David was no different than he was. The only difference was whose pockets Jesse's son would line with bribes.

Saul's mistake is one that grows only in darkness like a mushroom. When we are wicked, we suppose everyone else is the same. And we project our own malicious motives upon everyone else. So Saul assumed David would use bribes to win Judah just he had Benjamin.

But Saul was dead wrong about David. In the end, Jesse's son was so even handed in his treatment of other tribes, he risked losing the support of his own tribe. Saul was the one who depended upon bribes, not David.

However, that was not the only way Saul projected his own sins upon others. He also painted his own son with stains of sin.

...my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in ambush, as it is this day. Verse 8

When we are filled with selfishness and sin, everyone else smells the same to us. So Saul saw both David and Jonathan as mirrors of himself.

It was all backwards. Saul was the one who stirred up others against David. And Saul was the one who tried to ambush and murder David.

That is the price of embracing the darkness. The whole world rots before our eyes. And we live in a world of deception and illusion.

We cannot and will not see our own sin. Instead, we project our sinfulness upon others around us. They are the sinners, not us.

Pity

Deep in the darkness of the devil's deception, Saul did not see himself as a raging rebel and a marauding murderer. In his own eyes, he was a poor, pitiful victim.

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. Verse 8

There was madness in Saul's sorrow. He had plotted and schemed, connived and conspired to kill David. But he never owned up to his sin. Instead, he projected it all upon his faithful followers.

They were all conspiring against him. Even his own son was involved in intrigue against him.

Saul was savage, unstable, and unpredictable. He was violent and vindictive. But in his own mind he was poor and pitiful. No one, he said, feels sorry for me.

When we project our own evil designs upon others, self-pity is the natural result. But it is little more than an emotional veil we use to cover our own sins. And when we do that, we cannot and will not prosper.

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion. Proverbs 28:13

Deep in the Cave of Adullam, David wrote two psalms. And both of them show us how to deal with oppression. Instead of sulking and allowing his sorrow to sour into self-pity, David called out to God. He poured out his troubles to the Lord who loved him.

I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me. He will send from heaven and save me; He reproaches him who tramples upon me. Psalm 57:2-3

I cry aloud with my voice to the Lord; I make supplication with my voice to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him. Psalm 142:1-2

David never blamed anyone else for his own foolishness and failures. Neither did he waste time dwelling on his troubles and trials or his problems and pain. He did what Peter told us to do.

...humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. 1 Peter 5:6-7 (NKJV)

Self pity is poison to the soul. It excuses our every sin, justifying any act of iniquity. At the same time, it insulates us from the convicting and convincing voice of God's Holy Spirit.

The only way to deliver ourselves from self pity is to pour out our complaints and problems to our God. When we do that, we actually give all our pains over into His holy hands.

Then the Lord who loves us actually lifts those trials and troubles from our hearts and minds. So our minds and our moods are not deformed and distorted by the devil's dark deceptions.

We are free to see ourselves as we really are. We are free to confess and forsake our sin. We are free to be freed.

Pollution

Saul had no other captain who was quite so faithful as David was. But sin so twisted the king's heart, he saw his servant as an enemy.

And that is not all. No man could want a better son than Jonathan. The young prince was courageous and kind. He was a man of prayer who loved and trusted God with all his heart. But Saul's sin even soured his relationship with his son.

Because of sin, the king was blind to Jonathan's goodness and godliness. And he even saw his faithful son as an enemy.

If we turn our backs upon God and give ourselves to sin, it will do to us just what it did to Saul. It will spoil and pollute our relationship with friends. Worse yet, it will build walls of resentment between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, children and parents.

But it did not stop there. Sin also polluted Saul's faith in God. While the king was brooding with hatred for David, his herdsman spoke up.

I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. He inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine. Verses 9-10

Doeg's report was a masterpiece of half truth. The Edomite was so eager to be rewarded, he carefully left out the most important part of the story. Yes, the high priest had prayed for David. He had given the king's son-in-law food and a sword, too. But Ahimelech was not guilty of any conspiracy. He did not even know Saul considered David his enemy.

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." Verses 14-15

Samuel was not only God's prophet. He was also a judge over Israel. But when Saul became king, he took over Samuel's job as judge. And like the old prophet, Saul was supposed to judge men according to the rules and regulations Moses recorded in the Law.

And God's Law laid down very specific conditions concerning condemning a person to die.

On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. Deuteronomy 17:6-7

Saul had but one witness: Doeg the Edomite. And he was hardly reputable. But that made no difference to Saul.

But the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's household!" Verse 16

Saul did not even bother to take a few minutes to consider the matter. He delivered a sentence of death immediately. Then he commanded his guards to carry it out.

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. Verse 17

Saul’s soldiers were more honorable than their king. They refused. But if we persist in our sins, eventually God will no longer wall us off from even the most despicable of deeds.

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. Verses 18-19

Doeg was more than willing to hack the high priest to death. And he did not stop there. Nob, the city of priests, ran red with blood. Everyone there died at the Edomite’s hand.

Doeg was despicable. But Saul was the despot who ordered it all. Still, the king’s rage against God’s servants was predictable.

Even Saul knew David was not really his enemy. The one who had decreed Saul could no longer be king was the same one who selected David to take his place.

Deep inside Saul considered God Himself an enemy. That is the most frightening and fearsome danger of sin. It transforms the God who loves us and gave His Son to die for our sins into our eternal enemy.

That was Saul’s problem. God had become his enemy. By repeatedly trying to murder David, the king was really trying to overturn the Lord’s rejection of his reign as king. God was the one he hated.

But Creator was beyond the reach of Saul’s sword. So the king did the best he could. He killed the Lord’s servants: the priests of Nob.

Only one priest managed to escape. Ahimilech’s son, Abiathar, managed to make his way to David.

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. Verses 21-22

When David heard the terrible story of the priests’ slaughter, he did what Saul refused to do. He confessed and freely admitted his guilt.

Saul could have done that, too. At any point he could have confessed his sins. And God would have forgiven him.

How much more is our God willing to forgive and restore us! Jesus laid down His life to pay the penalty for our sins. And His Spirit works within us to produce repentance.

We do not have to drown in the darkness. We can be forever free. All we have to do is confess our sin and trust in Christ’s blood.