

TIMES OF TROUBLE

1 Samuel 21:1-26:25

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Introduction

I hear this song and I immediately think of my dad. Despite how it's Paul's mother who comes to him in a dream, The Beatles will always connect me with my father, who was avid fan as a teenager and kept up that passion and was sure to pass it on to me, which I am trying my best to pass on to my son. "Let It Be", I think though, ranks pretty highly for most people when it comes to Beatles' songs. It's a simple melody and chord progression that matches the tender lyrics. The song is first about one's individual life, when in times of trouble, hardship, uncertainty, whatever the case when life is beyond our control all we can do is let go and let it be.

But McCartney's song also transcends the individual experience. He begins to talk about the broken-hearted of the world, the divided, pointing to a time that will one day come when they will see the answer. 'Let it be' becomes then a dream of peace for all humankind. In all "Let It Be" hopefully makes us feel good and have a sense of optimism that things will get better.

It's a nice thought, but is it reasonable? It is usable? When we're in times of trouble can this little mantra of 'let it be' be enough to get us through? I guess my question this morning really just concerns the reality of suffering in life and how do we both make sense of and navigate through hardships and trials. Right, and I'm talking about the gambit of things we go through. Health or financial crises that sneak up on us out of nowhere, conflicts or troubles we have that we bear some responsibility in, or attack and persecution from others, our lives are full of troubles often; how do we square that with the Christian faith?

Well our passage this morning focuses on three key areas when it comes to God and suffering. We see, first, the reality of sin and the effect it has on us and the world around us. Second, we see that in a broken and fallen world like this God does not promise that following

Him and pursuing righteousness will always result in earthly prosperity and a pain-free life. God does not promise us health and wealth. Third, God is not aloof to our suffering, nor is He removed and distant. Rather, God's answer to evil and suffering was to take it upon Himself, that in Himself He could and would defeat and destroy it.

We're taking a bit of a different approach to our text this morning focusing on these main themes of the passage rather than move through these five chapters chronologically. This isn't to make light or to ignore the historical narrative and how it moves us forward to the eventual end of Saul's reign as king, but rather to help us see the theological themes of the passage and what they tell us about God, ourselves, and the Messiah.

I return then to the message of "Let It Be." While the song is by no means rooted in the Christian faith it does resonate with the Bible's message in many ways. There is so much in life that we can't control, much that we often make worse when we do try to control it. But by letting go and trusting God's perfect plans we can find peace. Moreover, while just pursuing some vague idea of harmony among humanity isn't the answer to the pain and division of this world, the Bible is clear that God's mission is to mend the brokenhearted and heal the nations. We can, indeed, let it be, knowing our God is in control and our God cares about each of our lives. 1

Samuel 21-26 show us that **God's true Messiah is a priestly King who gives of Himself, willing to endure scorn and rejection to bring about redemption for the people of God.**

1. True and False Kings

You recall from last time that David had fled Saul's house in chapter 20 after Saul's repeated attempts to murder him. In his increasing madness Saul is both jealous of David's fame and convinced he is going to usurp the throne. Essentially, David becomes Israel's most wanted and will spend the remainder of Saul's life in hiding, mostly in the wilderness. And yet, God will

continue to show him favor and will thwart Saul at every turn. Thus, these chapters first present us with the theme of **1. True and False Kings**, both in the persons of David and Saul but also in a way that challenges us to discern the kings we search for and serve in our lives.

That's been the theme of this entire series through Samuel, how you and I search for a king in our lives. Not literal monarchs, but we all both consciously and subconsciously look for things that will give us a sense of security and safety, or prosperity and fulfillment. We've been through numerous examples thus far throughout this series, and I suspect you could easily rattle off a handful of false kings in our lives: money, relationships, politics, career. The list goes on and on and usually it's not just one king that we serve but multiple ones. In the book of Samuel it was a literal king for Israel, one who would protect them from foreign enemies, who would ensure their financial prosperity, and one who would bring them fame and renown to the ends of the earth. But as we've seen, because Israel insisted on finding a king of their own liking and choosing, one in their own image, they've achieved none of these desires and they've slowly watched their king descend into madness and darkness.

It turns out Saul was seeking a king in his own life too. As the literal king Saul sought financial prosperity, fame and respect all in his career and position. The fame of the Lord wasn't enough for him; following the wisdom and will of God wasn't of interest to him. He believed he could gain the world through his own might and mind. Meanwhile, we've seen the prophet Samuel anoint the young shepherd boy David as king and thus far we've seen nothing but humility, courage, loyalty, integrity, a litany of virtues one would want in a leader. And now in chapter 21 we see something new in David, something priestly.

You see, as David and his men are on the run they come to the city of Nob seeking food. We read the priest there is afraid to meet with David, signaling to us that he knew King Saul was

after him and that meeting with, let alone helping, David would put him, Ahimelech, in severe danger. David claims to be on a mission from Saul, though I think it's safe to say everyone involved knows this is a lie. Nevertheless, David asks the priest for food but is told that there is only consecrated bread at the altar available, meaning bread that is not for ordinary men to eat.

The Bread of Presence (Exod. 25:23-30; Lev. 24:5-9) signified that at the tabernacle God's presence met with the people face-to-face. Only priests could eat it. But David takes claim of it, saying that both he and his men have been consecrated, meaning that in preparation for war or bloody conflict with Saul, David had anointed his soldiers, likely with the Nazarite vow. In essence, he and his men have set themselves apart as temporary priests for this mission they are on. Right, get this. Here was have this king-priest who comes and does something that seems to be in violation of the law of God, but because of who he is as decided by God he is fit to take and eat.

The same thing would happen years and years later when,

On the Sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to make their way, picking some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry — how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the bread of the Presence — which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests — and also gave some to his companions?" (Mark 2:23-26)

This passage tells us two things, one about David and one about Jesus.¹ Concerning David, Jesus affirms David's priestly status and his right as God's messiah to take and eat that which symbolized the very presence of God. This is what a true king looks like. But David, we're

¹ Thomas and Greear write, "As David could eat holy bread because God had anointed him for a purpose, God anointed Jesus for a purpose as well, and He could eat grain in the field," (Thomas & Greear, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 145). Morris adds, "It is the Son of David who is Lord. If David could override the law without blame, how much more could the much greater Son of David do so?" (Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Luke*, TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 123).

reminded, is type or a foreshadowing picture of who Jesus would be, the true and better Messiah, the true and better Bread of Presence, the true and better King-Priest of the order of Melchizedek. This was always who Israel needed, and who the whole world needs.

Contrast this true king, then, with the false one, Saul. As he gets word that David not only survives but seems to be getting help from the people, Saul turns on his servants, accusing them and his son of treachery. Note, then, that none deny this or defend themselves. No, the only one to speak up in support of Saul is Doeg the Edomite, a nation that historically were enemies of Israel. The Edomites had attacked Israel in the wilderness after the exodus; they would later betray Israel to the Babylonians. This Edomite is eager to help Saul and win his good graces.

Well, Ahimelech is questioned by Saul for his actions in assisting David and he doesn't deny his involvement. Rather he seeks to speak reason to Saul, that David is not his enemy. But madness has overtaken the king and he orders the death of Ahimelech and his whole family. Again, though, Saul's court refuses and it is Doeg the Edomite who steps up. Doeg kills not only Ahimelech but the entire priesthood and then the entire city. And this is who Saul listens to and aligns himself with.

Against this portrait of David, the true king and messiah, Saul positions himself an anti-messiah, bringer of death and destruction, terror and fear. The king that Israel had chosen for themselves brings wickedness upon them and he brings judgment upon himself. Psalm 52 was penned by David in response to this very event, where David writes,

Why boast about evil, you hero!
God's faithful love is constant.
Like a sharpened razor,
your tongue devises destruction,
working treachery.
You love evil instead of good,
lying instead of speaking truthfully. *Selah*

You love any words that destroy,
you treacherous tongue!
This is why God will bring you down forever.
He will take you, ripping you out of your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*
The righteous will see and fear,
and they will derisively say about that hero,
“Here is the man
who would not make God his refuge,
but trusted in the abundance of his riches,
taking refuge in his destructive behavior.”
But I am like a flourishing olive tree
in the house of God;
I trust in God’s faithful love forever and ever.
I will praise you forever for what you have done.
In the presence of your faithful people,
I will put my hope in your name, for it is good, (Psalm 52).

False kings lead to judgment, humiliation, and death. The true king brings flourishing and life. And, of course, we should remember that Saul didn’t start this way, that the destructive effects and controlling power of sin doesn’t happen just over night. Saul began in humility, sacrificial service. But just look at how jealousy, anger, fear, pride has overtaken Saul and what it had led to, and then as you watch this story unfold, examine your own life for these things. That’s what the pursuit of false kings produces in our hearts. [Jealousy, anger, fear, pride ... this leads to hatred, self-destruction, family destruction]

David is the true king-priest, and whereas false kings take and destroy, the true king brings provisions and life. David takes Ahimelech’s son, Abiathar, into his own household. He offers blessing, protection, and salvation. Then in chapter 23 when he hears of a Philistine attack on the city of Keilah, he puts himself at risk to deliver the city. Whereas Saul their king does nothing, David the true king redeems the city from foreign oppression. The false king’s response? He’s mad and jealous again and orders his troops to go attack the men who just delivered his people!

These false kings of our lives just take and take and take from us. They lead to further depression and unhappiness; they feed our discontentment and frustrations. They enslave us and eventually kill us. But the true king wants to deliver us, wants to save us, wants to bring us to fullness of life in the presence of God. And the tragedy is how we reject Him and esteem Him not. We'll reflect more in a moment on the deeper meaning of that truth, but for now we watch this pattern of David's trials, of suffering and hardship despite his obedience to God.

2. The Cost of Discipleship

Look at what happens as Saul prepares war against David at Keilah. Verse 11, the citizens of the city intend to hand David over. The guy who just saved them, they will betray and give him to death. David is Keilah's true savior, but he is rejected. Thus, he flees to the wilderness. Once more, the author of Samuel wants us to see the similarities between David and his story with the story of Israel to come before him. You'll notice that like the Exodus, David journeys to the wilderness, a place of trial and death, before he can enter into his own promised land, the kingship:

- Pursued by Pharaoh and Saul (Exod. 14:1-31; 1 Sam 23:15-29)
- Provision of manna/bread (Exod. 16:1-21; 1 Sam 21:1-6)
- Opposed by the Edomites (Num. 20:14-21; 1 Sam. 21:7; 22:11-19)
- Ammonites/Moabites and Nabal does not provide bread or water (Deut. 23:3-4; 1 Sam 25:11)

These similarities are more than just parallelism, though. They tell us about the journey of the people of God in this life, essentially about the cost of discipleship.

Let's go back a bit and start with Ahimelech in Nob. The king confronts him and Ahimelech clearly knows the stakes at hand. He knew the dangers when he helped David; he knows the dangers in what he says now. He could've denied it; he could've said 'I didn't know'; he could've said David threatened to kill me. But instead he actually rebukes the king. This priest

of God affirms David's innocence to Saul and refutes Saul's claim that David was planning to ambush the king. What's the result for Ahimelech's holiness and justice? It costs him and nearly his entire family their lives.

Then there's David. He puts himself in harm's way to deliver Keilah; they betray him. Then the Ziphites offer to hand him over to Saul. On the run he ends up living in a cave in the wilderness. I mean, it's like 'Come on, God! What are you doing?' God has anointed him as king and has left Saul, but since then kind of feels like He's nowhere to be seen. What do we do in these circumstances? What's our inclination or our feelings about God? How do we respond when things are not going as we expected it *would* or we think it *should*?

Well I think it really challenges us to first examine our presuppositions, our expectations. What did I think would happen in this situation or in my life? What do I believe should happen? Who do I think God is and what do I expect from Him? It comes down to what we discussed last time, is it my will or God's will that should be done? Am I just expecting God's will to affirm my will? Have I even been clear on what God's will is this whole time or not? How we answer these questions will directly shape the actions we next take. Because often, when we're convinced that things should be different than they are we then become most tempted to take matters into our own hands. If not that then we just throw up our hands, walk away, and give up.

David, though, watch this, does neither. There's a little humor in what happens next. As Saul and his men return from battle they happen to pass through the wilderness where David and his men are hiding. Not just that, but he decides that breakfast has caught up with him and he needs to relieve himself and he goes up and inside the very cave where David and his men are hiding.

Now, we're at a point in the Bible when we need to acknowledge something that no one may want to talk about this morning, but you all know me and know I never shy away from the tough stuff, so here it is: everybody poops. That's what Saul is doing here, and apparently, he didn't have enough fiber in his system because it's taking him a while getting this one out. So long that David and his men are able to watch all this happen and have a lengthy conversation about what to do.

In all seriousness, though, here's David's chance. Life is not going as he thought it would and by one stroke of his sword everything could change. Moreover, he's being pressured to do just that. His men, we read, encourage David to kill Saul, to be rid of the threat and assume the throne. But he doesn't. Rather, he cuts a portion of his clothes but is convicted not to harm Saul. For one, killing a defenseless man would be murder. Second, he knows that one cannot achieve the purposes of God by breaking the commands of God.

My point is that because David knows the character of God, the words of God, and has faith in the faithfulness of God he doesn't confuse his circumstances with the will of God. Right, it'd be easy to say, 'Look, God has done this so I can be rid of Saul.' But David doesn't read this situation through his own experiences or emotions. Rather, he reads it through the irrefutable words of God. It's incredible faith that David demonstrates, greater faith than I dare say I would have. Oh, friends, just how my first, second, third, and fourth instinct in times of trouble is to always figure it out myself, to take matters into my own hands, to somehow work it all out. But David knows his own guiltless condition with Saul and he knows God's faithfulness to His promises. These are the words that David wrote in this very situation:

Be gracious to me, God, be gracious to me,
for I take refuge in you.
I will seek refuge in the shadow of your wings
until danger passes.

I call to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
He reaches down from heaven and saves me,
challenging the one who tramples me. *Selah*
God sends his faithful love and truth.
I am surrounded by lions;
I lie down among devouring lions—
people whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.
God, be exalted above the heavens;
let your glory be over the whole earth.
They prepared a net for my steps;
I was despondent.
They dug a pit ahead of me,
but they fell into it! *Selah*
My heart is confident, God, my heart is confident.
I will sing; I will sing praises.
Wake up, my soul!
Wake up, harp and lyre!
I will wake up the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.
For your faithful love is as high as the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches the clouds.
God, be exalted above the heavens;
let your glory be over the whole earth, (Psalm 57).

Consider then, at least four things David demonstrates in the cave:

1. Trust in God's sovereignty
2. Trust in God's good purposes
3. Prioritizing God and His glory
4. Contentment in all circumstances

But also consider this. Even though David doesn't take matters into his own hands, neither does he just sit by quietly and endure injustice. Instead, verse 8 of chapter 24, he confronts Saul and, in these words, we see a plea for the violence to end and an indictment against Saul's actions. Once more, we have a portrait of what Israel's king should be like and, really, what all the people of God should look like. This is a choice of non-violence, believing instead that 'vengeance is mine,' sayeth the Lord, (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). It's a choice to

value and hold supreme the commands of God over the desires of self. Moreover, we'll see this prove to be a major faith-building experience for David. The lesson of this interaction confirms the choice of non-violence and will give David greater faith when he has the chance to kill Saul again.

This is part of the cost of discipleship, not just facing oppression and persecution but denying one's need for gratification or immediate justice. One of the most frustrating experiences in life I have is having to bite my tongue when someone says something insulting to me, or untrue, or just ignorant. Someone will say or do something that is hurtful or just unproductive and unhelpful and, oh, how badly I want to correct them or I want to have the last word. I want everyone to know I'm right. But the Spirit of God is clear that for me to do so could cause more hurt or more harm, that I need to be less concerned with my pride being hurt or proving others wrong. ("I see you")

You see, right on the heels of this interaction with Saul, we find this odd little story in chapter 25 about David's interactions with a man named Nabal. Apparently at some point David and his men had offered protection to Nabal's servants and flocks. Now a time comes for Nabal to offer David a small customary gift but he refuses. This may seem insignificant or petty to us, but in their culture this was a major insult. In an honor-shame culture, this act of shaming cannot go unnoticed or unaddressed. David's pride has been wounded and his impulse is to act.

Enter Nabal's wife, Abigail, another strong woman of faith in this book, who intervenes and offers David lavish gifts while pointing out how foolish her husband is. More significantly, Abigail admonishes David to trust that God will continue to provide and defend him and bring him into the fullness of Yahweh's promises. Following God means, again, not taking matters

into your own hands but trusting God will work everything out, which we read at the end of chapter 25 that He does, striking Nabal dead.

The cost of discipleship often means enduring the world's scorn and offense, it often means bearing insult and defamation. It often means hardship, uncertainty, even exile or death. The cost of discipleship includes times of trouble but finding comfort in the truth that we can let it be because God will take care of us and our situations. What He does may not always be how we would have done it but in the end we can know that whatever God does is the supremely best thing for us and for His world.

3. God's Messiah and Suffering

You see, in these moments when life seems unfair or God seems distant or uninvolved, when we struggle to have hope or see a light at the end of the tunnel, David's story reminds us that we are actually not alone. Because David's story does more than just give us a few anecdotes to hopefully compare ourselves to. David's story points us to the One who came and dwelt with us, who embodied and endured every hardship and moment of suffering. David's story reminds us that God's messiah knows how to identify with our hurt, fears, and anxieties.

Go back to chapter 23 and Keilah. When Saul prepares to attack the city and seize David we read that the citizens of the city intended to hand David over. It's incredible. The guy who just saved them, they will betray and give him to death. Saul is a false king, a bringer only of death and destruction and yet he is welcomed by the people. David is Keilah's true savior, but he is rejected. As the prophet Isaiah would write,

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of suffering who knew what sickness was.
He was like someone people turned away from;
he was despised, and we didn't value him, (Isaiah 53:3).

Jesus, the One who came to deliver us from death and shame, we rejected and we continue to reject. Whenever we give ourselves over to the false kings of this life, prioritizing them with our thoughts and actions, we are rejecting our true king and savior in favor of these other ones. But just as David continued to do what was right and to serve God's will, Jesus endured our scorn and ultimately freed us from our bondage to these false kings. Jesus is God's answer to suffering for in the cross Jesus experienced and took upon Himself the greatest act of injustice and evil ever known to man. But these things couldn't hold Him; they couldn't defeat Him. God's Messiah knows how to identify with our hurt, fears, and anxieties. God's Messiah knows how to overcome them.