

DAVID SPARES SAUL'S LIFE
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture· 1 Samuel 18:1–19:18; 24; 26
Key Passage· 1 Samuel 26:6–12, 21–24

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This is the second lesson in the first part entitled “Major Decisions in a Nation’s Beginning.” The first lesson, with its emphasis on the establishment of the monarchy and the expansion of Israel’s holy war activities, provided mostly negative guidelines for decision making. The old Israelite decisions for war and death are decisions which Christians should obviously avoid. In this lesson the focus of attention is on decisions for life, and the biblical material provides some positive guidelines for making major decisions for Christian action. David’s sparing of Saul’s life does provide a model for responsible Christian decision making.

The Biblical Setting

In the previous study it was noted that Saul did not seek the office of king of Israel. To the contrary, he wanted to avoid that responsibility, as indicated by his hiding under the baggage after the lots had been cast in his favor (1 Samuel 10:22). In some ways Saul must have recognized that the king was but “a man condemned to bear the public burden of a nation’s care.”¹

1. Matthew Prior, “Solomon on the Vanity of the World,” cited in William S. Walsh, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Prose*

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But once Saul accepted the position, he wanted to keep it, certain that God was not like a man who would change his mind and remove him from office. To a degree Saul was correct since, as Yahweh's anointed, he could never be impeached or peacefully removed from office. His removal from office could come only by ñeath. When Samuel announced to him that he would not remain king over Israel (15:28), Samuel indicated that the new king would be one of his "friends" (RSV uses the word "neighbor"). Saul had no way of knowing if the death which would remove him from office would come from the hand of his "friend" or an alien enemy.

To be king under the best of circumstances was difficult enough, but to be a king whose days were numbered proved to be too much for Saul. After Samuel's announcement of rejection, Saul began to manifest symptoms of what we can properly call mental illness. His behavior became erratic, and his moods were frequently filled with depression. The most conspicuous example of this erratic behavior was Saul's relationship to David. It turned into a love-hate relationship, with the love of Saul for David surfacing only after Jonathan's good word was spoken on David's behalf (19:4–7).

In the biblical tradition the mental illness of Saul is referred to in I Samuel 16:14: "Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." It must be noted that the word "evil" frequently has the specific meaning of "sick" in Hebrew idiom. For example, when the Pharaoh of Egypt dreamed of "seven cows, fat and sleek . . . and seven other cows . . . poor and very gaunt and thin"

and Poetical Quotations, rev. ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 404.

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(Genesis 41:18–19), the phrase “very gaunt” is literally “very evil in appearance.” But cows are not evil. Poor, thin cows are “sick” cows. The word “evil” in this context must mean “sick,” and similarly Saul’s “evil spirit” must be recognized as a sick spirit, that is, mental illness. The belief that sickness, including mental illness, comes from Yahweh reflects the theological view found in Deuteronomy 32:39: “and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal” and Isaiah 45:7: “I make weal [*shalom*, meaning ‘peace’ and ‘health’] and create woe [literally, ‘evil’ or ‘sickness’].”

There are two traditions which tell of Saul’s meeting David. According to 1 Samuel 16:14–23, David was brought to Saul at the suggestion of Saul’s personal servants. He was to become Saul’s personal “therapist.” Saul’s servants were anxious to have someone with musical talent who could soothe Saul out of his fits of deep depression. Because of David’s musical skill, Saul loved him greatly, and he requested Jesse to permit him to remain indefinitely in his service (v. 22). But David had both musical and militant talents. He became Saul’s armorbearer (v. 21) as well as his therapist. In both positions David became more than successful.

But another tradition, contained in 1 Samuel 17: 1–18:5, indicates that Saul first became acquainted with David after David’s defeat of Goliath. “When Saul saw David go forth against the Philistine, he said . . . “Whose son are you, young man?’ And David answered, ‘I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite’” (17:55–58). Subsequently, Saul appointed David over all of his military personnel. If David had been Saul’s court musician and armorbearer, [page 25] it is difficult to understand Saul’s failure to recognize him after he had killed Goliath. The appointment of a personal

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armorbearer to the position of “chief of staff” is also difficult to understand.

Despite these traditional differences in the story of how Saul became acquainted with David, there is uniformity in the evidence that the good relationship did not last long. Saul’s loving relationship with David turned into a life-and-death struggle for David. The only abiding love was the love between David and Saul’s son Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:26).

Through no fault of his own, David lost his touch in restoring Saul to emotional tranquillity. Several factors were involved in Saul’s sudden change of temperament which resulted in his command to Jonathan and his servants that they kill David (1 Samuel 19:1). David had indeed become Saul’s friend; and Samuel had indicated to Saul that the next king would be a friend of his. As long as David remained Saul’s intimate friend and a military chief, the more Saul was suspicious of David. It was not because of any wrong which David had done; rather, it was in spite of all the positive contributions David had made that Saul turned against him. At one point Saul actually confessed that David was going to be the next king over Israel: “And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand” (24:20). If David were killed, the threat to Saul’s reign (and perhaps even to his life) would be removed. Saul could then prove the fallibility of Samuel’s prophetic word. In an effort to save his throne, Saul decided to dispense with David and his threatening friendship.

Saul could also have been threatened by his own name and even by the name of David. It is not conspicuous to the reader of the English text, but the spelling of Saul’s name in Hebrew consonants is ideiflical with the spelling of the name Sheol, the resting place of the dead. By contrast, the name of David

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literally means “lord.” Could the particular names of these two men be merely coincidental to the actual events that were unfolding? David’s name must have been a constant reminder to Saul that his days on the throne were limited. The throne would certainly be given to one whose very name meant “lord.” On the other hand, Saul’s own name foreshadowed his future. He was destined for a premature journey to Sheol.

David’s popularity with the people and his brilliant military successes threatened Saul all the more. His behavior became more erratic, depressive, and paranoid. But we must admit that Samuel had also given him good reason to be afraid, even afraid of his friends.

David was actually caught in the middle. He had been secretly anointed by Samuel as the *next* king over Israel. He knew for certain what Saul could only surmise. David knew something else which Saul would never believe, namely, that the anointed king-in-waiting would never kill the present king upon the throne. David knew that Saul had no reason to fear him. But at the same time, David was well aware of Saul’s evil intent for him. Understandably, David fled from Saul’s presence after his life had been repeatedly threatened.

From Saul’s perspective his attack on David was but a typical case of royal rivalry. When two men make claim to the same throne, one of them usually gets killed. The question is, Which one is going to get the other one first? Saul was doing his best to make certain it was David who would receive a bed in Sheol rather than a seat over Israel. To the contrary, David was doing his best to make certain that both of them stayed alive as long as possible. David had no designs on Saul’s life.

The reason David did not want to kill Saul was that David wanted to protect the institution of the monarchy from the hand of the assassin. David knew that he was going to be the

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next king over Israel. If he tolerated the assassination of the divinely appointed Saul, he would be establishing the precedent for someone to assassinate him when he became king. David was planning ahead. He wanted to make it absolutely clear that the king of Israel was in an inviolable position. The best way to teach that lesson was to demonstrate it: although he could have killed, he decided to let the king live.

The first time David could have murdered Saul was when Saul mustered a force of three thousand men to find and kill David. Saul inadvertently entered the very cave in which David was hiding (1 Samuel 24:1–22). But instead of killing Saul, David simply cut off the hem of his garment. Then, as Saul made his exit from the cave, David called to him and indicated what he could have done to him and what he actually had done. Even though Saul was seeking to kill him, David had spared Saul's life. The reason David gave was, "I will not put forth my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed" (24:10).

The second time that Saul took a force of three thousand men to trap David, the attempt ended in the same manner. David's hiding place in the hills had been disclosed to Saul, who immediately launched a march to the hills. But David, as might be expected of a good military leader, saw Saul's forces approaching him. David waited until Saul's forces slept from exhaustion. Then he approached Saul's camp and was able to penetrate to the very center of the camp without being noticed. Saul slept soundly and was an easy target for an assassin's talent. But David commanded his subordinates to do Saul no greater harm than to embarrass him. Instead of using Saul's own spear to pin him to the ground, David simply wanted the weapon confiscated as proof that he could have killed Saul. David announced for a second time that no

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one was at liberty to raise his hand against the anointed one of God (see 26:1–25). David guaranteed not only the life of Saul, but he was guaranteeing also his own and the lives of all his descendants who would sit upon the throne of Israel. Monarchy was an accepted institution in Israel, but regicide would never be condoned. The anointed of God could die like any other man, but he could not be killed by another Israelite. Although Saul had been rejected by God, God had given no Israelite the permission to remove him from the throne.

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Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

1 Samuel 26:6—”And Abishai said, ‘I will go down with you.’”

Abishai was David’s nephew and one of David’s most dependable military leaders. The bravery of Jonathan, who fought the Philistine garrison with just the help of his armor-bearer, was matched by the heroism of Abishai. David needed a volunteer to accompany him into the heart of Saul’s three-thousand-man army. Abishai responded without hesitation, his own confidence matched by David’s confidence in him. The King James Version translation of 1 Samuel 26:7, “So David and Abishai came to the people by night,” is literal but misleading. The word “people” in the Hebrew text is the same word translated “army” in the Revised Standard Version. The latter translation is better in this context. The Hebrew author chose this particular word to indicate that Saul did not have a regular army. His army was made up of ordinary people, not professional soldiers. They were more like a militia or the early American “minutemen.”

Although nonprofessional, Saul’s troops were well armed, and David’s penetration to the secure inner circle where Saul

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was sleeping required the cool nerve of a military professional. Abishai proved to be a stealthy, steel-nerved volunteer. But Abishai was more brave than wise. He wanted to kill Saul and thereby introduce in Israel (with the very first king) assassination as a method for political transition. David's wisdom prevailed. The purpose of this intrigue was to mortify Saul with fear and embarrassment, not to wound him mortally. Instead of death, there was a temporary theft. When Saul awoke to find his weapon and water captured by the very fugitive he was seeking to capture, he was shocked to his senses.

1 Samuel 26:11 — “The Lord forbid that I should put forth my hand against the Lord’s anointed.”

Saul was the recognized princely leader over Israel. He had been selected by God, acclaimed by the people, and anointed by the prophet. He was Yahweh's *messiah*, God's anointed. Seemingly David, more than anyone else, affirmed this fact. This idea is expressed not only in 1 Samuel 26:11, but it occurs elsewhere in 1 Samuel 24:6, 10; and 26:9. David's refusal to kill Saul was obviously not because he lacked good reason to kill him or he never had the chance to murder him. Despite good reason and ample opportunity, David acted solely to force a reconciliation between himself and the king. David would not tolerate any idea of assassinating the anointed of God.

David's position on the inviolability of the Israelite king was not based upon precedent, since there had been no previous anointed leader. David was not following an *old* tradition; he was establishing a *new* tradition. David was well aware of the fact that he would be the next king over Israel. He had been told this by Samuel, Jonathan, and Saul (1 Sam-

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uel 16:13; 23:17; 24:20), and he never refused or refuted the idea. David was certainly looking ahead to the time when he would rule Israel. If he endangered Saul's life so that he might become king now, he would have established a dangerous precedent. David treated Saul as he wanted others to treat him. Therefore, the quest was for reconciliation and not assassination.

Applying the Lesson to Life

David's quest for reconciliation was limited to Saul during those days before he became king. After he became king, reconciliation was restricted to members of Saul's own family. Elsewhere, the priority was on nation building and the expansion of the empire. National greatness was measured by how great an area was under political control and how many people had been subjugated for taxation. The "golden age" of David was characterized by Israel's military excellence. But Israel's military superiority lasted for only seventy-five years. David was not faulted by sparing Saul's life; David was faulted for being a man of war. His great ambition to erect the temple of the Lord was made impossible because of his military record. David had to confess to his son Solomon:

“. . . . I had it in my heart to build a house to the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name . . .'" (1 Chronicles 22:7–8). Although many Israelites still considered their God, Yahweh, to be "a man of war" (Exodus 15:3), God intended, even in that long-ago day, to demonstrate through his temple that he was the God of peace.

David's decision for war provides the negative guideline from this biblical material. As Christians, we are to be "tem-

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ple builders” rather than “empire builders.” Temple building demands peace. What David realized only at the end of his life, the “Son of David” demonstrated throughout all of his life: “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), and “Blessed are the peacemakers” (v. 9).

The most significant and long-lasting contribution of David was his insistence that the anointed one of God was not to be assassinated for any reason. All persons are precious in the sight of God.

Another important point to remember is the simple fact that David planned ahead. He did not do to others what he did not want others to do to him. When he protected the life of King Saul, he was protecting his own life. The care with which David related to Saul is a model of long-range planning that merits full approval. Whether in civil politics or church politics, whether in domestic life or in public life, long-range planning may be the difference between security or tragedy. David’s wise decision in sparing Saul’s life established a precedent and made his heirs benefactors of his wisdom.

When Jesus made his statement, “Love your enemies” (Luke 6:27), he obviously had renounced the institution of holy war. But when he stated, “Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great” (v. 35), he may have been building on the model of David who said, “Here is the spear, O king! . . . The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness” (1 Samuel 26: 22–23).