

**“Hanging By a Thread?”***1 Samuel 19***Introduction**

Ever have the experience of reading a Bible story and seeing new things (new eyes), or having a familiar verse or section of scripture grip you or strike you in a new way? (E.g. Tim Geddert’s book, Double Take: new meanings from old stories; Kenneth Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes; Mark 5<sup>36</sup> when Elaine was hospitalized while pregnant with Jessica; Reading the Bible—Mark 5<sup>36</sup>—while hanging by a thread...)

Sometimes our experiences give us a different perspective, a different vantage point or set of lenses through which to read the story. We will hear the story very different when we are only a curious listener, than when we hear it as a person in desperate need and find ourselves feeling like the character in the story who is hanging by a thread. (e.g. Watching the “Despicable Me” movie after I had lost my job & finding myself crying during the scene where Gru gives all his minions the bad news that their jobs have come to an end!)

**Biblical Contact**

This morning we will be looking at a story from the life of David when he finds himself “hanging by a thread” not once, not twice, not three times, but four times within one chapter. What must have made it all the more difficult for David to understand was that 1 Samuel 19 is set within the larger story of the “Rise of David” and the “Fall of Saul”. I think he probably assumed, as we all do that since the shortest distance between where we are and where God’s promises would have us be is a straight line, that is the path God will take us on (e.g. “I will build my church...”). But life isn’t like that. (e.g. Lucy cartoon...Life from an “up” to an “upper up” or the “Someone’s not doing his job!” cartoon)

The power & genius of God lies not simply in is ability to deliver us “from trouble” but to sustain us in it and bring us through trouble, even when it

includes a journey through “the valley of the shadow of death” (physical death, the death of a dream, a relational train wreck like David experienced with Saul).

### **Turn to 1 Samuel 19** (four scenes)

- Context = God’s rejection of King Saul as a leader who stopped *following* God’s lead (15<sup>22-23</sup> = Samuel’s famous “To obey is better than sacrifice” speech).
- God’s anointing of David through the prophet Samuel... David’s subsequent call into the king’s court as Saul’s music therapist...David’s great military successes—over Goliath & their Philistine oppressors...<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 18 we are told that everyone seems to love David. Jonathan loves David; Michal loves David; all Israel and Judah love David. God loves and favours David<sup>18:14,28</sup>. Everyone loves David...except his boss and father-in-law Saul. Jealousy had gripped Saul, a root of bitterness began growing in him that will become toxic and deadly in its intent. **Read 1 Sam. 19**

It was at a top-secret staff meeting<sup>19:1</sup> that Saul put his cards on the table. Since his private attempts had failed to eliminate his rival in chapter 18, he now enlists his men (“his son Jonathan and all the attendants”) to help him “kill David”. So begins a chapter in which we see Saul engaging in a whole chain of deliberate plans to destroy David, and in which David experiences a whole chain of deliverances. As I noted, the chapter consists of four episodes each with a destructive attempt, and each with a story of deliverance. Let’s look at each scene in more detail.

**1<sup>st</sup> SCENE** – Saul disclosure of his destructive plan is countered by Jonathan’s intervention on David’s behalf. After putting David on high alert<sup>vv.2-3</sup>, Jonathan speaks with his Father, using rational, moral and theological rationale to try and mediate the conflict & bring his father to change his heart and mind (vv.4-5).

- don’t “wrong” the one who not only “has not wronged you” but rather has “benefited you greatly” (e.g. when he risked life & limb to kill Goliath)

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<sup>1</sup> As Dale Ralph Davis notes, “One cannot miss the repetitions in chapter 18. There are four references to David’s success (vv.5,14,15,30), three assertions that Yahweh is ‘with’ David (vv.12,14,28), and six uses of some form of the verb *to love* (Hebrew, *’ahab*) with David as the object (vv.1,3,16,20,22,28).” (1 Samuel, 195)

- “The LORD won a great victory for all Israel” (your reaction: “you saw it and were glad”)
- Father, your plans against him are irrational, immoral, and ungodly

So how did Saul react? He “listened to Jonathan” and did an about face, even promising on oath to destroy his destructive plans.<sup>2</sup> How delighted Jonathan must have been to deliver that good news to David and bring his dear friend back home to live as one big happy family. It’s amazing how many conflicts and dilemmas can be resolved if we face them and talk them out, rather than just stew on them. But some resolutions, even genuine resolutions, work only for a season until a new or renewed challenge arises.

**2<sup>nd</sup> SCENE** – For example, in verse 8 (scene two) we read that “Once more war broke out”, but more war prompted more Davidic success, and...unfortunately... more of Saul’s madness. David’s skill with a sword was set aside for his skill as music therapist. And Saul, with spear in hand,<sup>v.9</sup> why does he always seem to have a spear in hand, again tried to pin David to the wall like a bug. But with a warrior’s agility David evaded the throw. While the spear missed killing David’s body, it struck a deathly blow to his trust in Saul. That very moment he resolved not to trust him again, even if it meant having to leave his beloved friends & family & colleagues in the court behind to live like an outlaw.

Naturally, some readers will wonder about why, after Saul’s previous attempts to pin him to the wall (see 18<sup>11</sup>), David hadn’t already quit. Just as people often wonder why people in abusive situations at home or work stay as long as they do. At least one reason, in David’s case, was because Saul’s outbursts were sporadic and interspersed with reconciliatory promises and behaviors. He’s having one of his “spells”—that may well have been how Saul’s attendants talked about him at such times. Maybe others could stay living with Saul, through his “spells” but it became clear to David that he for one, could not.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary J. Evans makes the point that, “Saul’s confirmation of his word with an oath reflects the extremes of his mood swings.” 1 & 2 Samuel (NIBC), p. 89.

**3<sup>rd</sup> SCENE** – David must have wished that he had more time to think over his options, after all the decision was so difficult and the implications so huge. Saul would undoubtedly blame him for leaving and pin the breach in the relationship on him too. But he knew he couldn't allow such flagrant & life-threatening abuse to continue or he was doomed. His quick conversation with Michal confirmed that. And she herself, Saul's own daughter, must have wrestled with intense emotional angst being torn between her allegiance to her father and her husband.

Everything was happening so quickly that Michal knew David barely had time to escape. She quickly did the only thing she thought she could to buy them both more time—she put the household idols she had to good use. I'm not the first person to wonder why David & her had idols in their home in the first place, but the narrator is clear that they finally served the one function they were good for—dummies, crash test dummies!

Michal made it all very convincing. In our day, Michal would have plugged in the vaporizer and answered the door bell with a thermometer in hand and the smell of chicken noodle soup in the air. It was a masterful delay tactic<sup>vv.14-16</sup> but she quickly became the target of her father's wrath (v.17a). She shields herself by suggesting that David had forced her to do it. In other words, "Dad, what other choice did I really have?" And fortunately for her, Saul bought it.

**4<sup>th</sup> SCENE** – Meanwhile, David verse 18 tells us that "David had fled and made his escape", seeking refuge with the prophet who had from the beginning been his trusted guide, and whose home was less than an hour's walk from Gibeah, in Ramah. In an ironic & tragic twist, it was in Ramah that Saul had himself been anointed by Samuel; now Samuel was protecting David, *in that very place*.

Undoubtedly in response to hearing the magnitude of the murderous threats and plots of Saul, they went to the nearby village of Naioth to seek the protective power of Samuel's spiritual community. Once again the murderous hand of Saul reached to take hold of David. But when Saul's henchmen came

upon a group of prophets filled with the Spirit with Samuel standing there as their leader, the Spirit of God came upon Saul's men, not to empower them but to disarm them. Three times Saul's forces are mustered and three times miraculously disarmed by the spiritual power of a praying community.

“Finally, Saul himself left for Ramah and went to the great cistern at Seku” to take matters into his own hands. “But the [disarming] Spirit of God came even on him” the text tells us, “and he walked along [in prophet like ecstasy] until he came to Naioth.” **[SLIDE]** When Saul arrives he experiences a great reversal. The prophetic ecstasy which once offered confirmation of God's support, is now used to certify him as a person in direct opposition to God.

You see, back In 1 Samuel 10, when God's Spirit came upon Saul for the first time in his life, it came upon him, the text says, “in power” and he was “changed into a different person”. In other words, through the gift of God's Spirit, he was transformed, like the disciples at Pentecost in the New Testament, He was changed into someone with the necessary spiritual power to overcome God's enemies. But having persistently ignored and quenched and grieved the Spirit of God time and time and time again Saul's spiritual power diminishes and finally disappears. He is no longer fighting for God, but against him. Having ignored the first and second, and third warnings he himself goes in his own power to overcome God's people and he is humiliated. Stripped of all authority and power and sanity he is shamefully exposed for the fraud he has become.

“Is Saul also among the prophets?” the people say. It is a rhetorical question. Everyone who sees him knows the obvious answer. The first time the people asked it in chapter ten it was an obvious yes. Now it has become an obvious “No”. A spirit filled person doesn't act like this. Well, a person filled with an evil spirit yes, but not a person filled with the Holy Spirit. As Jesus would later say of spiritual frauds in the SOM, “by their fruit you will recognize them.”<sup>7:20</sup>

As we take in the sweep of the whole chapter I want to draw our attention to the incredible diversity of God's protection and deliverance.

The specific forms of God's deliverance varied greatly in David's life, a good sampling of which we witnessed in the four scenes we looked at today:

- 1) In scene one God's deliverance comes by his good friend Jonathan talking Saul toward reconciliation. (mediator, peacemaker, counsellor)
- 2) In scene two God's deliverance come by David's a form of self-help, in the sense of a quick instinctive response ("missed me by this much"...) )
- 3) In scene three God's deliverance comes through the warnings of a loved one, and a very shrewd strategy (cf. Moses deliverance in Ex. 1<sup>15-21</sup>)
- 4) In scene four God's deliverance come through the power of a prayerful, spirit-filled community of believers.

Though David is wordless in this chapter (notice the story teller does not quote him once), if we turn to Psalm 59 (turn to it) we read in the heading that this prayer was composed, at least mentally, in the context of scene two "*when Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him.*" We hear David begin his lament with repeated calls for God to "deliver" him from his "enemies", from "bloodthirsty men" he says who "lie in wait" for him and "conspire against" him for no good reason. "*They return at evening, snarling like [scavengers]" spewing out vile words from their lips.*"

But in the closing verses we hear David singing of God's strength and celebrating God as "my stronghold, and a refuge in the day of my distress."<sup>59:16</sup> I was reminded of a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon. Calvin has been making snowmen, and on this occasion made one swimming in shark infested snow. Hobbes says with a question mark, "Snowsharks?" and Calvin responds with what I imagine as Saul-like deviance in his voice, "That guy's a gonner."

In life it can look like evil has the upper hand (relational breakdowns at home, hostile takeovers at work, job interviews that all come up empty, test results that seem to say, "that guy's a gonner"). But this story reminds us that God's deliverance comes in a surprising and refreshing variety of ways and means for people who feel like they are hanging on by a thread. (e.g. my "manna" story)

## **Conclusion / Application**

We do well to ask: How much of David's experience can I transfer into my life? Can I simply say that what God has done for David, he'll also do for me. Not completely—this isn't a blank cheque. It's not a guarantee that being a peacemaker like Jonathan was, or seeking out a counsellor or mediator will always bring you the same result that it had for David in scene one. David himself, though he skillfully avoided the point of Saul's murderous attempts at the office three times, did not presume that God would deliver in a similar manner indefinitely and took action to get away when he could. Close family support, like we saw in scene three, is often a wonderful God-given means of protection and deliverance that we should lean on. **But** some families and workplaces and neighborhoods also include murderous Saul-like people that create havoc in families and neighborhoods (e.g. the Bonilla's in Colombia).

But stories like we read today were recorded for us so that we could all know David's God. Friends, as long as the Angel of the LORD keeps pitching his tent around those who fear him (Ps. 34<sup>7</sup>) I should not fear. No, I may not (I hope) need to climb out a window at night to run away from my killers, but if David's God is my God I can still trust his infinitely resourceful means of deliverance, and his "stronghold" and "refuge" like presence when the day comes and I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

- God's message = "Don't limit me!" Don't limit the means by which I can save, don't worry about your decreased resilience, when it inversely increases your capacity for reliance on me and others.