



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Lessons from the Life of David: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

“The Tragic Fruits of Disobedience”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] That’s not even an educated guess, but he was very young, and he has now been determined by God to be the king. So we read as a result of this in verse 14, but the Spirit of the Lord, after the Spirit had fallen on David, to give him the kind of equipment that he needed for the royal ministry, then but, “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him.”

There are some years, evidently, between verse 13 and verse 14. I just feel, though I cannot prove this, I don’t know of anyone who can prove it, that probably in this period of time, David was writing some of the famous psalms that he wrote. And some of those, particularly, that were especially appropriate for a young boy, out on the hills of Judea with his sheep, by himself, in the daytime and in the nighttime. The loneliness allowing him to think about the things of which he writes in some of his great psalms.

You think of Psalm 8, in which he reflected upon the Book of Genesis in the earlier chapters, how God had created Adam and Eve and in the light of the greatness of the creation about him he said, “What is man, that thou has created him?” And, reflected upon the greatness of God’s creation and the littleness of man.

He, probably, at that time also wrote, as my suggestion only, he wrote, probably, Psalm 19. He thought about the creation about him, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament sheweth his handiwork.” Reflecting upon God’s greatness in his creation and, at the same time, also, the greatness of God through the word of God upon which whatever he had he reflected and came to understand some of the things that the psalm says about that word. I can imagine David thinking of the law of the Lord as perfect; that it restores the soul.

“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward.”

No doubt, we would think of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” and that marvelous reflection upon the similarity between God as the great shepherd and the common task of the shepherds in those days. Probably, Psalm 29 as well, in which he reflects upon not simply the pleasant things in the universe, but some of the things that are not so pleasant, where he talks about the voice of the Lord in the midst of the storm. “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; The God of glory thunders, The Lord is over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful, The voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; Yes, the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon and He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord hews out flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness,” and so on, reflecting on the evidence of the mighty power of God and also, in some senses, the judgment of God in the midst of the universe of which he was a part.

Now, David, in the meantime, has grown from a tender youth to a robust manhood. But he’s still relatively young, when we read, “But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him.” Now, the Spirit here is a reference to the special equipment for the royal office; that is what Saul has lost, this is what David has gained. To put it in our language in a theological way, it was enduement with power.

Now, we are not to understand by this that David now has the internal permanently dwelling Holy Spirit that we have as a result of the finished work of the Lord, Jesus Christ. If you read John 7:37 through 39, and if you read John 14, verse 16 and 17, and some other passages, you will realize that the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit is impossible until the completion of the atoning work of the Lord, Jesus. The work of the Spirit in Old Testament times is largely the enduement with power for particular tasks. And this, the coming of the Spirit upon David, is for enduement with power to carry out the royal office that is his by result of God’s election and Samuel’s anointing.

Now, I want you to notice something that follows, or rather something that precedes in verse 13.

“Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. But, the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him.”

“An evil spirit from the Lord,” the modern reader with false views of God’s nature, who thinks of God as largely only a God of love and mercy, stumbles over texts like this, tends to pass by them, tends to think they do not have the same force as other texts that treat of the goodness of God. But look carefully at what is stated in verse 14. “An evil

spirit from Yahweh terrorized him.” In other words, this is a reflection of the fact that there lies within the power of God to hearten and the power to exercise mercy. That belongs to his sovereignty. This is his by virtue of his eternal sovereign being. And if we take that away from God, we are, in essence, limiting him and denying to him the full power of his deity. There are many passages in the word of God that one could turn to. I hope it is not necessary to turn to them. Job, himself, says, “God gives us the things that are good; but it is also the same God who sends to us the things that are not good.”

The Prophet Isaiah writes about the fact that it lies within the power of God to give good and it also within his power to give catastrophes and evil. Those are things that belong to God’s sovereignty because he is God. And if we seek to take these things away from God, we’re doing something very serious. We are limiting and, thus, denying the fullness of the sovereignty of our God.

Now, if you say to me, “I do not understand that,” well, that is a perfectly natural response and probably a justified one because no one of us understands fully, nor shall we ever understand fully, the nature and being of the infinite God. We are finite creatures. Please remember that. You’re just a finite creature. And most of us are not very impressive finite creatures either, [laughter] and are not specially gifted with the kind of intelligence that even other human beings are. So let us let God be God and wait until we enter into his presence to learn more about him.

But the writer of this particular chapter says, “The evil spirit from the Lord terrorized Saul.” That verb means, primarily, to fall upon, but it has these other senses, to terrorize as a result of it. And, as a matter of fact, one version renders, tormented him, intense mental agony with reason giving away from time to time, to temporary insanity. In other words, discord existed in the inner life of Saul.

As I think about Saul, I think, in one sense, he’s the Hamlet of the Old Testament. He’s a brooding, indecisive man who is unable to cope with the circumstances about him, because of his sin and unbelief.

Youst, one of the Hebrew writers, who wrote a history of the Jews since the time of the Maccabees, says, in his opinion, Saul suffered under that form of madness called hypochondria. And that the Jews gave this the name of bad air. Now, the bad air is the rendering of an expression that is used here, evil spirit, for the Hebrew word *ruwach* is a word that means wind, air, spirit; all of those things, just like the Greek word, *pneuma*, similarly. And with the word evil after it, you have bad air, bad spirit, evil spirit, rendered in our versions, generally, evil spirit. But you can understand how it might rendered by someone, bad air. And they held that the devil inhabited the air and the Apostle Paul is not far from that because he speaks of wicked spiritual beings that are in the high places of this universe, not in the highest heavens, but in the heavenlies there is the conflict that goes on between the Lord God and the evil spirits.

So they spoke of bad air, hypochondria. But, actually, the writer of this particular passages says that this came from the Lord God. Now, having said that in the verse 14, we turn to look at the divine providence exhibited in David's preparation. You cannot, of course, read this without noticing that. Saul has lost the support of Samuel, he's disturbed by his own life, as one recent commentator has written, "Saul needed help." And so, now, in verse 15 we read.

"Saul's servants then said to him, 'Behold now, an evil spirit from God is terrorizing you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you. Let them seek a man who is a skillful player on the harp; and it shall come about when the evil spirit from God is on you, that he shall play the harp with his hand, and you will be well.'"

So the ancient lyre or the harp is to be the portable tranquilizer of King Saul. It's the ancient valium, I suppose. But, at any rate, it was very common, not simply in a situation like this, but very common among the ancients to believe that the playing of music that might come from a harp or other musical instrument might have an effect upon

the perturbations of our minds. Pythagoras quieted the perturbations of his mind with a harp. Elijah, when chafed and disturbed of spirit called for a minstrel and was prepared by the soothing strains of the minstrel for prophetic inspiration. In other words, divine providence ordered the visit of David to Saul over whom, still, some mercy from God lingered. He was not only freed from the immediate pressure of fear and despondency, but restored to a mental condition, which was favorable to repentance and a return to God. There's nothing wrong in saying that music may be a kind of means of grace, not in the theological sense, but an instrument of grace and when rightly used conveys much spiritual benefit to men.

Listen to what Martin Luther said. Now, Luther, we know wrote hymns and loved music, reflected in the Lutherans hymnology, some great hymns, in Lutheran hymnology. It would be nice if we could sing some of them for they are filled with theology as well as with beautiful music. But Luther said that music is one of the fairest and most glorious gifts of God to which Satan is a bitter enemy, for it removes from the heart the weight of sorrow and the fascination of evil thoughts.

Charles Kingsley, who is well known for his literature, in fact, I read some of Kingsley's novels before I was converted. He was also a minister of the Gospel. He said, “It is a language by itself, just as perfect in its way as speech, as words, just as divine, just as blessed, all melody and all harmony, all music upon earth is beautiful in as far as it is a pattern and type of the everlasting music which is in heaven.” So music is an instrumentality, which God may use. But, there is an important thing for us to remember, that music is no curative. And the fact that we say that it may be, upon occasion, helpful, does not mean in any way that it will do any curative work. One of the things that I love is to hear good Christian music and I think that anyone who is a Christian man or woman rejoices in good Christian music in which the expressions of it are thoroughly biblical. And we enjoy it because it brings to our minds the great things that God has done in the

Lord, Jesus Christ. But it is no curative. As a matter of fact, it can be very grating upon people, too, as Rosanne Barr demonstrated not too long ago. [Laughter]

Saul’s illness, we must remember, according to the passage in 1 Samuel, in which his life is recorded, is an illness that came to him after disobedience. In other words, Saul had disobeyed God in three specific ways. I mentioned them last week. I’m not sure I can recall all of them, but you remember, he refused to kill Agag as God had told him to do. He, also, was willing to take his own son, Jonathan’s life until he was not allowed to do that. You can read the account, of course. Then, when he was told by Samuel to wait, to offer a sacrifice, when Samuel didn’t appear at the time he thought he should, he, himself, forced himself, he said, and offered the sacrifice wrongly. Saul was a disobedient man. He had persistently disobeyed the word of God and it’s not surprising then that the evil spirit from God has come to him. Saul’s illness comes after confrontation with Samuel over obedience. Please remember that. That is so important, that the perturbations of mind, the mental disharmony that existed in Saul is the result so far as the Scripture is concerned of his disobedience.

Martin Luther once said, “Next to theology, I give music first place and the greatest honor to music.” Next to theology, I give the first place and the greatest honor to music. In other words, theology is the important thing but after theology, Luther said, he liked music. So when we think about Saul, we need to think about the theology of disobedience that brought him to the condition in which he was in.

Now, it’s important also to notice in verse 16 or verse 14 and 16. In verse 14 the text reads, “An evil spirit from Yahweh terrorized him.” In verse 16 we read, “When the evil spirit from God is on you.” Now, you don’t have to be told that there are different terms in the Hebrew text for God, and the term that is translated Yahweh, is a term that refers to the covenant keeping God of Israel. The term Eloheim is a term that can be, actually, used of heathen gods and even of angels and judges, human judges. But it is a term for God with not that special sense of the covenant keeping God.

So, we turn as we look at the text and we read in verse 16 that the individual who is suggesting this to Saul says, “When the evil spirit from God is on you.” That’s almost as if he’s unwilling to ascribe action to Yahweh, their covenant deity, and so he doesn’t use the covenant term, Yahweh, but uses the more general term. It’s almost as if he’s not willing to acknowledge the kind of sovereignty to Israel’s covenant God that the Scriptures acknowledge. So, the writer of 1 Samuel, however, does not hesitate to say, as he does in verse 14, “An evil spirit from Yahweh terrorized him.”

Now, then the individual who is making the suggestion to Saul about a man who is a skillful player on the harp, and if he plays, then Saul will become well. Saul then, after this, said to the servants, “Well, you provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” And one of the young men answered, and said, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is a skillful musician, a mighty man of valor, a warrior, one prudent in speech, and a handsome man; and the Lord is with him.”

Now, you cannot help but see the sovereign hand of God in his divine providence in this. This individual has seen David; he knows something of his qualifications. And so, at the precise moment when Saul needs help and also, above that, as God’s purposes are unfolding that ultimately will bring that young stripling to the throne of Israel, there he is in the presence of the King and able to offer the suggestion that they go and get this young man, whom he describes in such a marvelous way in the 18th verse.

Now, the way he describes David is most unusual. He, in effect, describes him as the kind of young man from whose girdle there hang all the keys of life. This is the one person that every mother would love to have her daughter marry. Every Christian mother, think of that? If my daughter could just marry a skilful player on the harp who is a musician, a mighty man of valor, a warrior, one prudent in speech and a handsome man, and the Lord with him, all of you mothers sitting out there who have children and have little children who are female, you couldn’t ask for anything more for a son-in-law than someone like David. He is every mother’s favorite kind of son-in-law. Look, he’s regal,

he's talented, he's courageous, he's a fighter, he's wise in speech, he's handsome, think of all of that. But, best of all, the Lord is with him. I like that little expression that he's prudent in speech.

As you well know, I like to read the funny papers. One of the things that I like to read is the little picture, usually, of some incident in sports. It's called “Sports Hall of Shame.” Well, this past week, there was a picture of a manager who was arguing with an umpire, and it was Earl Weaver, who used to manage the Baltimore Orioles, a great manager but noted for being argumentative and being ousted from baseball games, one of the great managers of a generation back. Well, in 1972, he began to argue with an umpire over a seldom called rule that the umpire had called against his team. They argued back and forth, and finally Weaver said, “I know the rules as well as you do.” He said, “I've got a book in the club house to prove it.” The umpire said, “I've got a book with me now, and I'll show you.” And Weaver replied, in marvelous words, “That's no good because I can't read Braille.” [Laughter] Now, he was immediately ousted. He was not very prudent in speech. Now, I don't think the author of 1 Samuel really had that in mind when he wrote this, but nevertheless, David if you will follow his career, you will find that he was a man who was wise and prudent in his speech.

Now, I don't understand some of these things that were said about David because there's some question about the accounts that are found here. Why is he called a man of war, now, because that would suggest that he's been truly in significant battles? But, perhaps, the young man who is describing him, has known about how David or perhaps with him or with someone else has been involved in some skirmishes with Philistines, Philistine rustlers, perhaps, who wanted to rustle some of his sheep and he had managed to keep them from doing it. But, at any rate, the text says all of these things about him and as far as I know they were all true about David. Most of all, of course, the Lord is with him. And you cannot say anything more about any individual than that.

Someone has written with reference to this expression about David, “He had no hesitation in describing himself as ‘thy servant’ liable to hidden and presumptuous faults from which he desired above all things to be delivered. He thought of God as his rock, his redeemer, his shepherd, the host in the house of his life, his comforter in every darksome glen, in weariness he found green pastures, in thirst still waters, in perplexity, righteous guidance, in danger, sure defense, in what the Lord was to his soul. God’s word though he knew but a part of it, was perfect, right and pure. And as he recited it to himself under great nature’s tent, it restored his soul, rejoiced his heart, enlightened his eyes and seemed better than honey that dripped from the rock. He set the Lord always before him because he was at his right hand and he could not be moved, and therefore his heart was glad.”

That is the secret of a successful life as a Christian man; to set the Lord always before us in all of the experiences of life. And David had them. He had times of despair. He had times of trial. He had times of difficulties. Life was at stake. He often wondered why he was suffering as he was suffering but, nevertheless, he set the Lord always before him and his experiences were interpreted by that great fact that the sovereign Lord God had his hand upon him in all the experiences of life.

And my Christian friend, I do not know of any thing more that would be helpful for you than that fact, to remember that in all the experiences of our life as believers in Christ, to set the Lord always before us is the counsel we need. It’s no wonder that David said that the Lord was his counselor. And let me tell you this, if you truly have him as your counselor, you do not need the counsel of me or of any other person. The Lord before us and with us, under us, by our side, is the great counselor of his saints. And I urge you to let him counsel you. That was Saul’s fault. That was David, by the grace of God, his strength.

Now, David came to the court. He had faithfully fulfilled the routine of daily duty that God had for him out on the hills of Judea. Saul, incidentally, expected obedience

and so he commanded Jesse to send his son, but he's the man who commands disobedience but does not, himself, comply with God's demands of him. And the result is that Saul's life, from this time on, is a life that will lead as someone has said, “To the gathering gloom of Gilbor” where he finally lost his life as the brooding Hamlet of the Old Testament.

David came and attended him; he was his armor bearer that prepared him for his service as king in the court and we are surprised to read in verse 21 that Saul loved him greatly. In one sense we are not surprised and in another, we are. You cannot help but appreciate the charm of the presence of David. And even though, fundamentally, there was disagreement and envy and jealousy, as we shall see, nevertheless, Saul in some of the spirits of his mind, there was room for love for David, at least for a time. We know it wasn't long before he was hurling spears at David as he played upon the harp. And if there is anything that suggests to us the fact that the ministry of the harp is only temporary and not ultimately restorative, it is that, because while Saul responded to the harp upon occasions, later on as David was playing, at least twice, he threw his spear at him, hoping to slay him and spent the rest of the time chasing him out over the hills of the land.

Let me say just a word or two in conclusion. What were the causes of Saul's mental disturbance? Well, to put them together, we could say first of all that it was the secret consciousness of sin. Haunted by the fact that he was a disobedient man, he has disobeyed the Lord, as I mentioned in those three occasions, his life represents a conscious disobedience of the Lord God. And, as someone has put it, his sin haunts him as a ghost. And anyone who has ever sinned against the Lord God consciously knows exactly what happens to the heart. And in Saul's case, there was that secret consciousness of sin of which, so far as we know, he never truly repented. For a while, he acknowledged his sin, shortly thereafter, he was continuing to do the same thing.

Secondly, the knowledge of the loss of a goodly heritage. What Saul had been offered was the king over the people of God, but as a result of his disobedience, he recognizes that he has lost that and the fact that the ministry of the heart was only transitory meant that he was plagued and troubled by what he might have been had he responded in obedience. He was also afraid of exposure, for he asked Samuel once that Samuel would not expose him. We read in verse 30 of chapter 15.

“Then he said, ‘I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the Lord your God.’”

“Please honor me.” He did not wish to be exposed, but he did not repent. And, consequently, the disobedience and the disturbance of his mind continued.

And, finally, his secret persistence in wrong doing. If there is anyone who cherished sin over a lengthy period of time, it was King Saul. David’s harp alleviated his troubles from time to time but did not remove them, for in the final analysis, my Christian friend, music, while helpful, is no cure of the sin of heart. There is only one cure and that is the blood of a redeeming Son of God, who died upon Calvary’s Cross. And if we do not have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins through him, then we have no permanent cure. The fact of God’s punitive justice or divine retribution, expressed itself in Saul in times of violent passion, in madness like our Lord’s parable of the Prodigal Son who took all of his goods, went off into the far country, wasted them in riotous living. But then Scripture said, he finally came to himself. And, in his case, he came to himself, came back, received forgiveness. Saul never did, so as a result of that his experience with the Lord God was expressed in the violent passion and spiritual madness and, finally, in spiritual death.

The excellent gift of music, then, to come back to the opening words that I mentioned to you may be perverted. Isn’t it interesting that in the word of God that is

precisely what we find. Isaiah writes about it. Amos writes about it as well. And I'd like to read the passage in Amos, in which we have reference to it. In Amos in chapter 6 and beginning at about verse 5, this is what we read, as Amos talks about the sin of the people to whom he was sent, he says.

“Who improvised to the sound of the harp, And like David have composed songs for themselves, Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore, they will now go into exile at the head of the exiles, and the sprawlers' banqueting will pass away.”

In other words, in the midst of their sinful banquets and experiences, there was, nevertheless, the playing of music and the music, of course, was the wrong kind of celebration of the things of the spirit; for they are of no value apart from the reality of redemption.

Isaiah writes, “And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine, but they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord nor do they consider the work of his hands.” The disease was still there.

There is an interesting little statement that I would like to read in conclusion. It was made by one of the Bonars. I do not know which one. They were 19th Century Scottish men; I've referred to Horatio and Andrew Bonar from time to time. But, one of them wrote concerning this, these words. He spoke about the fact that Saul's trouble was alleviated but not removed, the disease was still there. He spoke about David's harp being negative and superficial. As results there are many outward applications which act like special chloroform upon the soul. They soothe and calm and please, but that is all. They do not go below the surface, nor touch the deep-seated malady within. And, speaking in nineteenth century Scotland, he said something like, “Our age is full of such appliances, literary and religious, all got up for the purpose of soothing the troubled

spirits of men.” Some of these things may not apply to us, but listen to what Mr. Bonar said, “Excitement, gaiety, balls, theatres, operas, concerts, ecclesiastical music, dresses, performances, what are all these but man’s appliances for casting out the evil spirit and healing the soul’s hurt without having recourse to God’s remedy” We do not speak against the enjoyment of certain things that have to do with life. But, if they are means of covering up our fundamental need then there is sin.

When the Lord Jesus was in the land and when he met the Gerasenes demoniac, you remember, that the demoniac realized that he was in the presence of someone who could cast out the demons. The demons realized that. They were legion. And so they cried out to him that he would not cast them out without making a special request of them. They requested of him that he would send those demons out into the herd of swine that were nearby. There were two thousand of them, so one of the texts says. And as a result of that, the Lord Jesus cast out the demons out of the individual and the swine, now having the demons rushed down into the sea and all perished. And you can see the headlines. The price of pork has gone up dramatically in the land. [Laughter]

But the most significant thing to me, and the thing I’d like to put a finger on, is that as a result of that we read that the demoniac stood in the presence of the Lord, in quote, “his right mind.” “In his right mind.” That is the confidence that we have when we trust in our Lord, Jesus Christ, bring our lives into conformity with him and the Scriptures, and even in our failures, look to him and repent and confess our sins, we can expect that God, as David said, will be our counselor, and he will keep us as he says, in our right minds.

May God help us to remember that? If you are here today and you’ve never believed in our Lord, we point you to him who died for sinners. Receive him as your own savior.

Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, how grateful we are for the lessons that come from Scripture. As we look at our lives, there are so many times when we have to acknowledge our sin. O God, give us the grace of repentance and the consequent forgiveness that comes from confession. May the life of David and of others of the saints who walked in greater measure, with the Lord always before their faces move us to a life of fervent, obedience, and submission to Thy word.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.