CHAPTER 3. THE MADNESS OF KING SAUL


I. Two Kinds of Kings.

Our Scripture introduces us to two types of kings. Though Saul had the throne, he had lost the anointing. Though David had the anointing, he had no throne. Saul threw spears. David dodged them. This lesson will focus primarily on King Saul; seeking to understand his fall. Apparently God wanted David to learn these lessons as well!

A. Saul’s blessings.

Chosen by God himself to be the first king of Israel (10:1), the Lord gave Saul a new heart, filled him with the Spirit, enabled him to prophesy, and turned him into new man (10:6, 9–10). Few men have had a more promising beginning than Saul!

B. Saul’s slippery slope of folly.

Yet, early in his reign, on two separate occasions he made a willful choice to disobey a clear command of God:

1. In the face of an imminent Philistine threat, he did not wait for Samuel but assumed the role of a priest and offered a sacrifice to God (13:1–15).

2. Although Saul was clearly commanded to annihilate the Amalekites, he spared the best animals and the king (15:1–35). Partial obedience is equivalent to disobedience.

NOTE: Saul was chosen by God and entrusted with a divine mission. God had changed Saul’s heart and anointed him with his Spirit for the life he was called to live. Yet Saul repeatedly made willful choices to turn from God’s way and do things his own way. He was the consummate controller and is to the Old Testament what Judas is to the New Testament. To his dying day, Saul insisted on doing things his own way! When he showed interest in God it was only to seek support for what he already planned to do. Like an unbroken stallion, his will was never fully surrendered to the Lord. The root of Saul’s madness is here: not your will but mine be done.

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. (C. S. Lewis, The Great Divorce).

3. Saul’s willful, continual disobedience was a sin on the same level as witchcraft! (15:23). Samuel states the matter bluntly to Saul: “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king” (15:23).

4. Saul’s life continued to spiral downward into increasingly irrational and dark behaviors: prophesying naked (19:24), consulting a witch (28:3–25), and suicide (31:1–6).
5. Saul’s tragic fall was not caused by the Philistines, Satan or God. He self-destructed. Looking back on his life, he summarized it all by saying “I have played the fool” (26:21).

B. Saul’s legacy.

What happened? How to account for a tragic life like Saul’s? Given the amount of biblical material devoted to his life, God apparently wants us to learn from Saul’s example. He especially wants David to learn! God was preparing David to be the greatest king in history and thus put him in a specially devised training program. Perhaps the best way to learn how to be a good leader is to serve a bad one!

II. Diagnosing the Madness.

A. Imagine the scene: Saul raving in the palace; David playing his harp and calming the king. Then suddenly, the madness returns and a spear is thrown! Why? How to account for a man who has everything (power, wealth, position, etc.) being threatened by a teenager with a guitar?

NOTE: Music is powerful (16:14–23). The music of David’s lyre refreshed and soothed the raving lunacy that troubled King Saul. This passage suggests that music is therapeutic and positive when it is melodic (lyre), skillfully performed, and is rooted in godliness (the Lord is with David). But just as God can use music for good, so Satan can use music for evil. Perhaps we could suggest that music that is not melodic, not skillfully performed and not rooted in godliness is a source of great evil in this world. Alan Redpath says that music that is throbbing and hypnotic, that dulls the conscience, drugs the senses and stops our thinking is not good for the soul (p. 36).

B. The name for Saul’s madness is envy.

Jealousy is wanting what someone else has. Envy goes further. It begrudges the fact that you have it and wants to deprive you from having it. “Sorrow at another’s good” (Aquinas). It is rejoicing with those who weep and weeping with those who rejoice (cf. Rom 12:15). Erma Bombeck captures the madness of envy when she said, “Lord, if you can’t make me thin, then make my friends fat.” Envious people want to throw spears!

C. What made Saul envious?

It is hard to tell exactly when the poison of envy took root in Saul’s life. But the real problem began when the women of Israel began to sing: “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7). The women were not belittling Saul; au contraire! They were rejoicing in the strong leadership being exercised in the land. But this little song caused Saul to turn green with envy.

Beyond this, Saul would have been troubled by the fact that:

- His son Jonathan had become David’s best friend (18:1–4).
- His daughter Michal was in love with David (18:20).
- Everything David did was successful (18:5, 14).
- Everyone loved David; he was very popular (18:16).

D. Six characteristics of envy.

1. Envy makes us obsessive about our image. The dominating question in life becomes “How do I look?” Saul’s focus was no longer on what God thought but rather on what the people thought (15:24, 30). Because of envy, Saul can only compare himself with David. “Lord, what about this man?” (John 21:21). At its
core, envy is \textit{competition} with others. Frederick Buechner defines envy as “the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are.”

2. Envy makes us angry and \textit{bitter} (18:8). The word “anger” contains the idea of “burning.” Saul was smoldering inside. Life seems so unfair! Envy took root when Saul \textit{compared} his victories to David’s. (Antonio Salieri as described in \textit{The Way It’s Not Supposed to Be} by Plantinga, p. 161). This is what happened to \textit{Cain}. When God seemed to bless his brother more, he “was very angry and his face fell” (Gen. 4:5). So he too, like Saul, looked for the nearest spear.

3. Envy makes us depressed and \textit{paranoid}. Saul began to imagine a vast, right-wing conspiracy was working to undermine his reign (18:8). Envy makes us so self-centered we imagine that everyone is thinking about us! In its mature form, paranoia is a psychotic condition characterized by \textit{delusions} of persecution. Such people see things that aren’t there. They attribute evil intentions to innocent bystanders.

4. Envy makes us \textit{cruel}. On three occasions Saul tried to spear David (18:11; 19:10). Fortunately, he was either a bad shot or David was a good dodger! Saul then promises his eldest daughter to David in marriage but at the last moment, changes his mind (18:17–19). The bride price for his daughter Michal is 100 dead Philistines (18:25). Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery because they were jealous (Gen 37:11). And the chief priests delivered Jesus to be crucified because of envy (Mark 15:10). Yes, envy makes people do really hurtful things to others! (Miss Harvest Queen. Plantinga, p. 158).

5. Envy makes us full of \textit{fears}. Three times we are told that Saul was afraid of David (18:12, 15, 29). But this fear was neurotic, phobic, \textit{irrational} because David was not trying to hurt Saul but help him! Jealous people are controlled by their fears, especially their fear of losing control, losing what they think they possess.

6. Envy makes us vulnerable to \textit{evil spirits}. Three times we are told that “an evil spirit from the Lord” came upon Saul (16:14; 18:10; 19:9). When evil spirits are at work a person’s behavior may become truly bizarre and violent (“raving,” 18:10). But the question needs to be asked: did the evil spirits cause Saul to be jealous or did Saul’s jealousy cause him to be oppressed by evil spirits? Was he envious because he was crazy? Or was he crazy because he was envious? Regardless of how one might answer, we learn that jealousy, in its mature forms, is a type of \textit{demon possession}.

\textbf{NOTE:} How can God be described as the source of Saul’s evil spirit? With its strong insistence on monotheism, the Old Testament is reticent to give any credit to Satan or demons for any activity in the world. Thus, everything that happens (even bad things) are said to be caused by God. Old Testament writers tend to focus on \textit{ultimate} causes, not secondary, intermediate ones. The New Testament is more nuanced and indicates that bad things happen because God \textbf{permits} them, not because he \textbf{causes} them. This distinction is absent in the Old Testament. (Who is responsible for 9/11?).

\textbf{III. There is a cure!}

A. Recognize the danger and heed the warnings.

If envy can destroy Cain in a worship service and Saul who was filled with the Spirit, it can destroy you! “Envy makes the bones rot” (Prov 14:30). “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and \textit{every vile practice}” (James 3:16). This helps to explain why both jealousy and envy are listed in the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19–21) and why envy has always been included in the list of \textit{Seven Deadly
Sins. Here are a few questions to ask to help determine whether envy may be taking root in your heart:


2. Do I base my self-worth on how I **compare** to others?

3. Do I **weep** with those who weep... or am I inwardly rejoicing?

4. Do I **rejoice** with those who rejoice... or am I inwardly depressed?

5. How does the **fear** of losing control manifest itself in my life?

6. Does the poison of **bitterness** find root in my heart?


**B. Steps to victory.**

1. **Confess** your sin.

Don’t wait until you spear some poor teenager to the wall to wake up to your inner cancer! The first step to victory over envy is to admit that one is envious (I John 1:9).

2. **Learn** contentment.

The jealous person is never content. Ironically, all the other Deadly Sins (pride, lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger) give temporary pleasure. But envy is the one sin that only makes the sinner miserable. To win the battle over envy will require that we **learn** how to be content, regardless of our circumstances.

   ...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:11–13)

3. **Be jealous/zealous** for God.

A single word in Greek is translated in English as “jealous” and at other times as “zealous.” When sin is in the heart, our motives are impure (envy, jealousy, greed, etc.). But when our hearts are holy, our **ambitions** become godly passions. “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord” (Prov 23:17 NIV). Let your conduct be governed by “godly jealousy” (II Cor 11:2 NIV). To have godly zeal is to be jealous for the things of God.

4. **Come to a place of absolute surrender** of your will to God.

Saul (like the disciples before Pentecost) illustrates that one experience with Jesus Christ is not enough. Like wild stallions, we must come to a place of full surrender where the will is **broken** and we become unconditionally devoted to the Lordship of Christ in our lives. Not **my will** but your will be done.
# TABLE TALK

1. Discuss a time when someone threw a “spear” at you. How did you feel? What did you do? What have you learned?

2. Do you tend to rejoice when those close to you experience great blessing? Do you weep when they experience some great loss? Do you ever find that your heart wants to do just the opposite?

3. Have you thrown a spear lately? Wanna talk about it?

4. Are you learning how to be content in all circumstance? Describe the learning process.

5. Paul says that “love does not envy” (I Cor 13:4). Discuss this.

6. Before this lesson, did you consider envy as a “deadly sin”? Discuss why you think others have chosen to include it in the list of Seven Deadly Sins?

7. Did Saul lose his salvation?
Zeal Is that Pure and Heavenly Flame

By John Newton

Zeal is that pure and heavenly flame,
The fire of love supplies;
While that which often bears the name,
Is self in a disguise.

True zeal is merciful and mild,
Can pity and forbear;
The false is headstrong, fierce and wild,
And breathes revenge and war.

While zeal for truth the Christian warms,
He knows the worth of peace;
But self contends for names and forms,
Its party to increase.

Zeal has attained its highest aim,
Its end is satisfied;
If sinners love the Savior's name,
Nor seeks it ought beside.

But self however well employed,
Has its own ends in view;
And says as boasting Jehu cried,
"Come see what I can do."

Self may its poor reward obtain,
And be applauded here;
But zeal the best applause will gain,
When Jesus shall appear.

Dear Lord, the idol self dethrone,
And from our hearts remove;
And let no zeal by us be shown,
But that which springs from love.