

1 Samuel 16:13-23

SI: We’ve turned a page in our study of 1 Samuel. David has stepped onto the stage and from this point on he is the hero of the story. Against all odds he progresses to the throne of Israel.

INTRO: When I was in seminary the church I worked in had a prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings. The core group and leaders of the prayer meeting were some elderly folks who had been praying together for decades. There was a good spirit there, but no chit-chat. They would read prayer requests given to them from church members, letters from missionaries, take a few verbal requests, and then get down to business.

There was a middle-aged woman who had started attending the church. She had some kind of chronic illness. She asked the prayer meeting to pray for her healing. So someone prayed: Dear Lord, please, please heal Jane of her illness. But, Lord, if you choose not to heal her, give her the grace to accept this illness as from your hand. Well, Jane did not like that prayer one bit. When it was over she said with heat. This illness is not from God’s hand. It is not his will. I will never accept that. If this had been in the South, where we usually deal with awkward situations by smoothing things over, some of those older ladies would have probably hugged her and changed the subject.

But this wasn’t the South, it was St. Louis. They don’t call Missouri the Show Me State for nothing. Midwesterners are direct. Those older women said: Well, Jane, if your illness isn’t from the Lord, then who is it from? Are the bad things that happen in the world outside of his will? Doesn’t the Bible tell us that God is sovereign over all things.

I can’t remember how Jane responded, but I can understand her objection. How can a good God, a loving God, a holy God—
how can he have anything to do with bad and evil things?
How can those things be part of his plan?
We all love the passage Jonathan read earlier in the service, Romans 8—

that God works all things for our good and nothing can separate us from his love in Christ.

The Bible often presents it that way—positively, winsomely.

But sometimes the Bible presents this same truth of God's sovereign will in a way that is so hard it almost seems intended to offend us and rock us back on our heels.

As the story of David's rise to the throne of Israel continues,

Saul's dementia will play a major role in the events as they unfold.

He becomes increasingly paranoid and homicidal and hurts lots of people—particularly David.

Where does Saul's dementia come from?

The writer of Samuel doesn't hesitate to tell us: It comes from God.

The Lord not only took his spirit away from Saul—took away the blessing that equipped Saul to be a good king, if he had only been willing—

God not only took that away, but he sent an evil spirit to Saul to torment him.

And it was through Saul's torment that God introduced David into Saul's court.

This is not what we expect to hear God has done.

We immediately think of biblical statements such as:

God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

How do we reconcile these statements about God with that same God sending an evil spirit to torment a man?

For Jane and for many people, it's not a theoretical question.

How do I reconcile the bad and evil things I personally encounter with the

Bible's revelation of an all good, all loving, and all powerful God?

Does God's really include bad and evil things?

Let's answer this under three headings:

1. God's Word
2. Our Hope
3. Christ's Work

MP#1 God's Word

If this were the only place in the Bible that said this, about an evil spirit sent from God to torment a man, then we might put it aside. But it's not.

There are many places where God is said to rule over dark and sinful responses of human hearts in order to bring to pass his will in the world.

We've seen an example already in 1 Samuel. Remember Eli's sons?

They were corrupt priests—were stealing offerings from people, sexually abusing women who came to worship.

Eli rebuked them. Told them to repent and quit sinning. But Samuel says:

They did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.

We'll read later about Saul trying to murder David and we're told the reason was because "an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul."

Remember in Exodus how many times it says the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Hardened his heart so Pharaoh wouldn't let the Israelites so that the Lord could then hit Egypt with another disastrous plague.

Same thing is said about Sihon, king of the Amorites.

Israelites asked if they could peacefully pass through his land.

But the Lord God made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate so that he would attack the Israelites and be destroyed.

When the Israelites got to Canaan, the Canaanites never surrendered or tried to make peace. They fought until they were totally destroyed. Why? Bible says:

For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord commanded Moses.:

When we come to the New Testament it doesn't get any better.

Jesus says in John 9 that he actually came to blind the spiritual eyes of some people so that they would suffer God's judgment.

For judgment I have come into this world so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.

Paul says in 2 Thessalonians that the Lord will send spiritual delusion on many people living in the last generation before Christ's return.

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believe the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

And John says something similar in Revelation.

God has put it in their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule until God's words are fulfilled.

There are many more passages like that. God's will includes bad and evil things.

The Bible gives example after example.
The Bible also says that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.
That's also true.

God's will includes the sinful acts and destructive mental states of people.
The Bible also says that God is not the author of evil nor does he tempt
anyone to evil. Both are true.

God is able to use human sin sinlessly to accomplish his purposes.
He is able to harden hearts of people so they are destroyed by sins they commit.
And at the same time those people whose hearts he hardens are absolutely
responsible and accountable for the evil they think and do.
Both are true.

Are we able to harmonize all this biblical data into a clear, unconfusing image?
No. God is far above us and his ways are beyond our knowing.

How he exercises control of the human heart, we can't say.
How he ensures that sinfulness and rebellion will accomplish his holy will—
we can't explain.
How God can send evil spirits to torment wicked kings and harden their hearts
so they become even more cruel and stubborn, leading to their own destruction—
How God can do that and remain perfectly good and pure and holy—
I can't explain that.

But the Bible is not really interested in resolving these perplexing questions.
It is interested in convincing you that God is on his throne,
that he does what pleases him and nothing is outside his control.
Even the worst things that happen in the world, the most outrageous and
wicked things, the cruelest and most confusing things are subject to him
and come to pass in order to accomplish his will.

That may be perplexing, but it's the foundation of our hope,
which is our second point . . .

MP#2 Our Hope

I've given lots of examples in the Bible of this or that bad or evil thing

being the will of God. But I haven't mentioned the worst one of all.
What's the worst thing ever done?

What's the greatest evil ever carried out?

What was the most unjust, cruel act ever committed?

The crucifixion of the Son of God. The execution of the Prince of Life.

Did God have anything to do with that?

Was that evil deed God's holy will?

Listen to what Peter told the Jews:

This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Who put Jesus to death? Wicked men, morally responsible, guilty men.

But whose set purpose and foreknowledge, whose eternal will planned and decreed Jesus' death? God's.

Here it is again in Acts 4. The believers were praying:

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Who was guilty of conspiring against Jesus?

Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the Jew of Jerusalem. They plotted.

They planned the evil deed. They conspired. They killed him.

Whose power and will decided beforehand that this should happen?

God's.

God planned in eternity to use this wicked act to bring about the greatest good—the salvation of the world.

This story in Samuel is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ.

David had been anointed king.

But how will this young shepherd actually take the throne of Israel?

How will he become a blessing to God's people

David couldn't learn how to rule a kingdom out in the fields watching sheep—so God arranged for him to move where all the action was happening.

God lifted him out of his rural environment and placed in the court of King Saul.

It's here David's training for his life's calling begins.

God accomplished that through something terrible—Saul's demented mind.

Which was brought about by an evil spirit sent from God.

Saul needed music, it was the only thing that would calm him.

So the door was opened for David.

As time passes, Saul gets worse. He becomes homicidally paranoid.

The evil spirit drives him to try to murder David.

David has to flee and live on the run.

But it's during those years on the run he learns the soldiers' life.

He learns to lead men.

And through all this David is shaped and molded and becomes the greatest king of Israel and the founder of a dynasty that would one day bring forth the King of kings and Lord of lords—Jesus Christ.

There are lots of things that disturb us, things that give us reason to fear, things that seem greatly harmful to the kingdom of God and to our own selves. But it is essential for Christians to know that all these things are the will of God and are accomplishing his purposes and hastening the coming of Christ.

This past Thanksgiving we were visiting my parents up in NC.

Their church had a service Thanksgiving morning and they are praying with all their hearts for a Presbyterian pastor from that town, from Black Mountain, named Andrew Brunson.

Andrew and his wife Norine have been missionaries in Turkey for over 20 years.

He planted a church in Izmir which he pastors.

They have two children in college in the US.

Back in October after the failed coup in Turkey, Andrew and Norine were arrested.

She was released but he was taken before a secret court, no attorney, no US rep, no testimony or evidence, and was sentenced to max security prison as a terrorist.

Everybody knows the dictator Erdogan is using this failed coup to frame people.

One group he wants to wipe out is the small Christian community in Turkey.

But here's our hope. Pastor Andrew is in prison because the Lord put him there.

And the Lord used an evil, paranoid dictator to do it.

But Erdogan, just like King Saul, just like Pontius Pilate, is being directed by the sovereign hand of God to accomplish his purposes.

I don't know what God's plans are. This doesn't look like a good plan to me.

It's terribly hard on the Brunsons and on their little Turkish church—

but things looked grim when Jesus died, and look what God brought about.

We can't stop here. There is one more vitally important point. I'll call it . . .

MP#3 Christ's Work

The proper use of this teaching is to give us hope and confidence.

But this teaching that God's will includes all things, that even the bad and evil

things are sent from him, this can be misunderstood and abused by Christians. Here's how. It can make us fatalistic and passive. It can make us shrug our shoulders and shake our heads and say—
Well, I guess that's God's will.
God's going to work it out. I'll pray that God's will be done in this situation.
But there's nothing for me to do.

God sent the evil spirit to trouble Saul. It was his will and plan.
But what did David do?

Did he say: Obviously it's God's will that Saul suffer this way?
No. He played his harp and sang to Saul to ease his troubled mind.
He used all his skill as a musician to drive away the evil spirit.

I want you to picture it—this deeply disturbed man in mental agony—
brought on by his own rebellion against God and God's punishment.
It's a shame that when Saul was suffering his attendants didn't say:
Saul, this is an evil spirit from God troubling you, you need to get right with God.
You need to repent. Instead of repentance they opted for music therapy.
But for that reason David didn't refuse to play for Saul.
He didn't say, music would just treat the symptom and not the disease.
He had pity on Saul's suffering and did all he could to alleviate it.

As I've said over and over, David is a prototype of Jesus Christ.
This is what Jesus came to do—
to push back against all the pain and misery in this world.

Why is the world so troubled?

Because of Adam's sin, certainly. But also because of God's curse.
When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the Lord God said—
You're cursed because of this. And the world is cursed.
You're going to experience misery in every part of life.
The curse and all its ramifications is God's will.

But it was also God's will to send a Redeemer who would push back hard
against the curse and bring relief from the misery it caused.

So we must say simultaneously—Bad and evil things are sent by God
and I'm going to be like Jesus and push back against them with all my might.
Whatever opportunity you have to alleviate suffering through your action
or skill, do it, even if it doesn't have a positive spiritual effect.

Any time you bring order and peace and relief from suffering you're doing the
work of Jesus. Pushing back against the curse.

I think of those of you who are called into the medical field, what a great example

your work is of this. You're playing the harp of medicine, giving people relief. Whether they respond spiritually to God or not, doing the work of Christ.

And the other way you must use this doctrine rightly in your prayers.

Of course we must pray that God's will be done.

Jesus teaches us to pray that way: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

But he also teaches us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread.

We have to do both.

Back to that tense prayer meeting in St. Louis many years ago.

Those elderly church members, those prayer warriors, they asked God for things.

They prayed for people to be healed, they prayed for prisoners to be released.

They prayed genuinely and sincerely that Jane would be healed.

And at the same time they always prayed that believers would rest in the will of God—even when his will is very unpleasant and hard.

Don't be fatalistic in your prayers either.

If God's will includes the bad and evil things, then that means he has absolutely total control over them and can change them with a word.

I've been praying for Andrew Brunson, that he will be released from that terrible Turkish prison, that he will be back in the arms of his wife and his college kids.

I'm praying that until that happens he won't be tortured, that like Joseph he'll find favor in the eyes of the prisoners and guards.

But I'm praying those prayers knowing that he's there and he's suffering because the Lord has put him there and neither trouble nor hardship nor persecution nor famine nor nakedness nor danger nor sword shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.