

CHAPTER 3: RIVALRY

THE BIG PICTURE

Saul is on a downward spiral, David is on the rise, but the issue of who will rule in Israel is far from settled. Saul has no intentions of giving up the throne without a fight, regardless of what The Lord has revealed. Chapters 18-31 contain a dramatic collection of narratives that show us the character of David as we witness Saul unravel. Saul's story is one of thrown spears, irrational fears, and frustrated tears as he strives against the loss of his influence and power. Despite attempts on his life, being chased through the desert and into caves, and losing everything overnight, David makes the most of whatever situation he finds himself in. This theme will permeate the rest of the story in 1 Samuel: **Saul's struggle against the will of God is contrasted with David's surrender to the will of God.** Story after story will reveal examples of the way Saul takes matters into his own hands - motivated by fear, paranoia, and pride. David refuses to do the same; he demonstrates submission to the will of God and maintains an attitude of simple trust. When David has the chance to grasp or seize power - to assert his own position and secure his own advancement - he resists the temptation and instead chooses to wait for God's timing. Pay attention as you work through this section to the artful way the story is told. The narrator allows the reader to learn a great deal about David through the eyes of others, without ever telling us what David is thinking or feeling.

ENTER THE STORY:

- I. **1 Samuel 18:5-16** paints a dramatic picture: Saul obviously has some deep psychological problems. He has fits of jealousy that turn into murderous rage multiple times. Some scholars have speculated about the nature of Saul's psychological imbalance, listing paranoid schizophrenia or extreme bipolar disorder as possibilities. The author, however, is more interested in the theological cause than such details. He wants the reader to recognize that Saul's mental collapse is directly related to the departure of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Don't fret about the difficult phrase some English Bible's translate "an evil spirit from the Lord." This could also be translated as "deep depression" or a "disturbing mental state." Saul has rejected God's ways, and he is suffering because of his choice. In a twist of irony, David is both a comfort and a curse to Saul. His success makes Saul paranoid and fearful, while his musical gifts soothe Saul's psychological pain. This is just one example of the complex relationships between characters in this narrative. The reader knows what Saul cannot see: his fears are irrational because David does not wish to harm Saul.
 - Have you ever struggled with fear, paranoia, or other thoughts that you knew were irrational? How did you overcome them?

- Have you ever found music to be therapeutic like it was with Saul? How can music impact our emotional state, positively or negatively?
 - Saul's story can teach us vital lessons about relationships that are poisoned by fear. Do you have any relationships that are influenced by fear? Why do you think fear is such a destructive force in relationships?
- II. The people of Israel, along with two key members of Saul's household, admire David, while Saul looks at David fearfully. Saul is losing influence, and the allegiance of his own children is transferred to David. David's dramatic escape from Saul's murderous intentions recounted in **1 Samuel 19** is an exciting read. Take note of the irony: Saul's own children act to defend and protect David from the king's wrath. It is easy to imagine Michal using a statue to fool Saul's men into thinking David was sick in bed.
- In this chapter Jonathan is able to achieve reconciliation between Saul and David for a brief time. Have you ever tried to reconcile two people involved in a conflict? Spiritually speaking, Jesus is often depicted as one who reconciles humanity to God. How is Jonathan's role in this story different from that of Jesus?
 - The choice of Saul's children to side with David was probably a difficult one. Have you ever had to choose sides in a conflict? What would have to happen for you to side against a member of your own family?
- III. Saul comes to the conclusion that to protect his dynasty, David must die. Saul's outburst of anger in **1 Samuel 21:1-9** is an accurate assessment of the situation. David's rise comes at great cost to Jonathan. ***Jonathan is perfectly positioned to betray David, and he has every reason to do so.*** If Jonathan sides with David, he is choosing to give up the throne. With this in mind, David's deep trust in Jonathan is surprising. David is willing to put his life in the hands of his friend. The modern world rarely witnesses such a relationship. This is a dog-eat-dog world, where if it is to someone's advantage, the only thing you can count on that person doing is putting down others as they scramble to the top. David trusts that Jonathan's own interests will be outweighed by Jonathan's loyalty to him. The strength of their relationship is described by the Hebrew word *hesed*. The best translation might be "covenant fidelity," but is often translated unfailing love, loyalty, faithfulness, or kindness. The foundation of their fierce loyalty is a covenant friendship that involves the promise of mutual protection. It is a social contract that obligates the one in the position of power to give help the one in need. Jonathan has every reason to see David as a rival and as a threat, and if David does in fact acquire the throne, he in turn has every reason to eliminate Jonathan's descendants to secure his position. Both parties appeal to their covenant to motivate the other to remain loyal despite the pressures to do otherwise. This relationship of

interdependence between David and Jonathan foreshadows the covenant community of the New Testament, where the early followers of Jesus had all things in common and were one in heart and mind. Notice again the contrast: Saul tries to control Jonathan as he struggles against God, while David trusts Jonathan as he surrenders to God's plan.

- Think about the natural desire for a son to want to please his father. Do you think whether or not to betray David was a difficult decision for Jonathan? Do you think he was ever tempted to play both sides? Have you ever been torn between two friends or two relationships like that?
- Jesus once said: "Greater love has no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends." How does Jonathan embody the kind of love Jesus described? Do you have any friends that would give up their crown for you? Are you that kind of friend to anyone?
- Jonathan's friendship defies cultural understanding and is one of the most beautiful demonstrations of selfless love in scripture. How can you better protect, promote, and serve those around you with this kind of love?
- Compare the nature of Saul's relationships with the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan. Are your relationships defined by control and manipulation, or by trust and selfless service?

IV. Notice how many times the text notes David fleeing or escaping. David is on the run, and Saul is in pursuit. David flees from Saul to Samuel, then to Naioth at Ramah, then back to Jonathan at Gibeah, then to Nob and the priest Ahimelech. These details illustrate the desperate circumstances of David's story. Read the account of the brief time of shelter David enjoys in the cave of Adullam in **1 Samuel 22:1-5**. One crisis after another drove David into a cave, and remarkably, he does not complain or give in to despair. Instead, he inspires and empowers the rejects and misfits that gather around him to become mighty men. Keep in mind that David has a promise from God that someday he will be king. Here, David is little more than the king of fools, but he makes the best of it.

- When you are faced with big problems and discouraging circumstances, do you complain about it, or rise up and make the best of the situation?
- David's display of resilience is profound – nothing seems to keep him down. Why do you think he was able to bounce back from adversity so consistently? How can we grow in this same strength ourselves?
- What does it say about David's character and ability that he was able to inspire and empower these outcasts and misfits to become mighty warriors?

V. Twice the author of 1 Samuel gives us surprising stories of David sparing Saul's life. In both **1 Samuel 24** and **1 Samuel 26**, David has the opportunity to end the rivalry by removing the source of the problem. These stories are masterfully told and easy to imagine. It would be easy for David to justify killing Saul. David certainly had reason to strike Saul down in self-defense or even as an act of retaliation for the wrong done to him. Saul certainly would have killed David if the tables were turned. When Abishai stood over Saul, spear in hand, imagine how David must have remembered all the times Saul hurled that spear in his direction! David makes a very difficult and God-honoring choice twice, and in doing so, teaches us something amazing about surrendering to the will of God. David refuses to take his destiny in his own hands. He refuses to grasp for the throne by force.

- Do you think that David's choice to flee from Saul was cowardly? How about his choice to let Saul live? Why or why not?
- Revenge is the act of dispensing justice *as we see fit* after we have been wronged. We want to settle the score or to get even or to payback what is due the people that wrong us. How well do David's actions reflect the teaching of Jesus on revenge that is recorded in **Luke 6:27-36**?
- How would the story be different if David killed Saul or allowed him to be killed? Would your respect for David grow or diminish?
- Ambition is normally looked at as a virtue in our culture. Ambitious people rise to the top and get things done. The Bible generally warns people against selfish ambition and treats it as a vice. How does David's posture of surrender and submission differ from our culture's attitude? Do you think ambition has a place in the Kingdom of God? Why or why not?
- It is clear that David's refusal to harm Saul is ultimately because David believes that Saul's authority comes from God. To act against Saul, in David's way of thinking, would be to act against God because Saul is "the Lord's anointed." Does God still expect us to submit to those in authority today? Is it possible for someone to be a legitimate authority, even if you do not agree with their decisions or their leadership? What lessons can we learn about submitting to authority from David's attitude?
- Some argue that the strength of David's leadership rests on his ability to submit to God's authority and to follow God's lead. True or false: "In God's Kingdom, you can't be an effective leader until you learn to be a careful follower." Explain your answer.