

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

1 Samuel 23

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“He is such a nice person. Why would God let him go through such a difficult time? Why do bad things happen to good people?”

As a pastor, it seems I get asked a question like that with some regularity, though part of the answer to this question is: “There really are no totally ‘good people,’ because God alone is good.”

The answer I give usually is something like this:

- 1) **I don’t know.** I don’t know why God would allow this person to experience this particular difficulty.
- 2) **The fact I don’t know the reason hardly means there is no reason.** God is under no obligation to explain his reasons to me or anyone else.
- 3) **I may not know the reason, but I do know it is hardly the first time God allowed bad things to happen to a seemingly good person.**

Take, for example, David, the man who ended up being the greatest king the nation of Israel ever had. His life was full of bad things. The path David took to become king was long and difficult.

It is interesting that the writer of 1 and 2 Samuel devotes 20 chapters to David’s 40-year reign as king and 20 chapters to the very difficult 10+ years from when Samuel anoints David as king and when he actually assumes that role.

Though I don’t always find it is easy to recognize, the Lord has important things to say to us through these chapters.

Our journey through 1 Samuel brings us today to chapter 23 (page 245). Let’s pause and pray that we would hear and heed the words the Lord has for us this morning.

As we come to 1 Samuel 23, King Saul is continuing to try to hunt down David and kill him because he sees him as a threat to the

throne. David, along with a few hundred of his men, is living as a fugitive in various parts of the Israeli wilderness.

1 Samuel 23:1 – It was reported to David: “Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and raiding the threshing floors.”

Keilah is in western Judah, probably about 12 miles east of the Philistine city of Gath. The Philistines, the primary enemy of Israel, are stealing that town’s food. David asked the Lord what he should do.

1 Samuel 23:2b – The Lord answered David, “Launch an attack against the Philistines and rescue Keilah.”

David’s men are not excited about doing this, however. They have no desire to go up against Philistine forces. So David once again inquires of the Lord and receives this answer:

1 Samuel 23:4b – “Go at once to Keilah, for I will hand the Philistines over to you.”

That is exactly what happened.

1 Samuel 23:5 – David and his men went to Keilah, fought against the Philistines, drove their livestock away, and inflicted heavy losses on them. So David rescued the inhabitants of Keilah.

We then have this note:

1 Samuel 23:6 – Abiathar son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, and he brought an ephod with him.

Remember, Ahimelech was the chief priest who had been killed by Saul at Nob. Abiathar had escaped and now becomes David’s close associate. The ephod is the breastplate worn by the chief priest. It contained the Urim and the Thummim, two devices which are kind of mysteries to us, but which were used to discern the Lord’s will.

The point seems to be that Abiathar, maybe the only priest left in Israel, serves David, not Saul. With the ephod, God will speak through Abiathar and will reveal himself, not to Saul, but to David. Yes, Saul is still the official king, but in many ways David functions as the true king.

1 Samuel 23:7 – When it was reported to Saul that David had gone to Keilah, he said, “God has handed him over to me, for he has trapped himself by entering a town with barred gates.”

It is interesting that Saul – the man who has just murdered all the priests who were serving the Lord, somehow assumes that *the Lord is on his side* in this conflict with David.

Abraham Lincoln talked about how, rather than claiming that God is on our side, we should be making sure we are on God’s side. Saul would have benefited from following that advice.

Anyway, Saul leads his troops to Keilah where he believes he will capture David. David hears that Saul is coming, and through Abiathar and the ephod, consults the Lord. He asks, “Lord, is Saul indeed coming to attack the city? And will the people of Keilah hand me over to him, to protect themselves?” God’s answer is, “Yes, Saul is coming, and yes, the people of Keilah will betray you and hand you over to Saul.”

Knowing that...

1 Samuel 23:13 – David and his men, numbering about six hundred left Keilah at once and moved from place to place. When it was reported to Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he called off the expedition.

Then we have this summary...

1 Samuel 23:14a – David then stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph.

He is moving south and east, into the Judean hill country.

1 Samuel 23:14b – Saul searched for him every day, but God did not hand David over to him.

Saul is the king. His army is far superior to David’s little band. Yet, he is not able to capture or kill David because God is protecting him. What are the odds of Saul being able to defeat the Lord? Well, let’s just say no better than Goliath’s.

Saul continues to pursue David in the wilderness of Ziph.

1 Samuel 23:16 – Then Saul’s son Jonathan came to David in Horesh and encouraged him in his faith in God.

This is another example of the deep love and strong commitment Jonathan and David have for each other. We talked about their friendship a few weeks ago. Here we again see that the foundation of their relationship is a common commitment to honoring the Lord. Jonathan then says:

1 Samuel 23:17 – “Don’t be afraid, for my father Saul will never lay a hand on you. You yourself will be king over Israel, and I’ll be your second-in-command. Even my father Saul knows it is true.”

Though Saul is under the illusion that God is somehow on his side, Jonathan knows that the Lord has chosen David to be the new king. He seems more confident of this than David himself.

And even though normally he should be the one succeeding his father Saul, Jonathan is totally content with the thought he will play second fiddle, the world’s most difficult instrument to play. Whether he is right about Saul knowing that David will be king, I am not sure. I suspect deep down inside and in his moments of lucidity, Saul did indeed know that was true.

In verse 19, some of the men from Ziph go and tell Saul that David is hiding in Horesh, a town about five miles west of Ziph. They say:

1 Samuel 23:20 – “Now, whenever the king wants to come down, let him come down.

Our part will be to hand him over to the king.”

Their willingness to betray David pleases Saul.

1 Samuel 23:21 – “May you be blessed by the LORD,” replied Saul, “for you have shown concern for me.”

That is Saul’s focus: “What is good for me?” Saul tells the men from Ziph to go back and find out exactly where David is and report back to him. By this time, however, David and his men have moved to an area near Maon, a town about five miles south of Ziph. Eventually Saul learns this and pursues David there. This time it looks like David will be captured.

1 Samuel 23:26 – Saul went along one side of the mountain and David and his men went along the other side. Even though David was hurrying to get away from Saul, Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them.

However, at this point, something happens which prevents Saul from capturing David. And remember, when we are reading 1 Samuel, the things that happen don’t just happen. God is at work, making sure his plans and purposes are fulfilled. What happens is...

1 Samuel 23:27 – A messenger came to Saul saying, “Come quickly, because the Philistines have raided the land!” So Saul broke off his pursuit of David and went to engage the Philistines. Therefore, that place was named the Rock of Separation. From there David went up and stayed in the strongholds of En-gedi.

En-gedi is an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea, about 10 miles straight east of Ziph. It is very near, some think may even be, the Jewish fortress of Massada.

OK, so in this text, David first learns that the people he rescued in Keilah intend to betray him, and then he is betrayed by some of the citizens of Ziph. As a result, he is a fugitive, hiding in the Judean wilderness, without even a permanent camp for him and his men.

Reflecting upon these events, David would later write Psalm 54 where the heading reads:

A psalm of David, regarding the time the Ziphites came and said to Saul, “We know where David is hiding.”

Psalm 54:3 – Strangers rise up against me, and violent men intend to kill me. They do not let God guide them.

The psalm closes with:

Psalm 54:7 – For he has rescued me from every trouble, and my eye has looked down on my enemies.

Indeed, David was betrayed and forced to live as a fugitive. Yet, ultimately, the Lord protected and vindicated him. He becomes the greatest king Israel has ever seen. Though people reject him, God does not.

So, what lessons does the Lord have for us in this passage?

First, I want to highlight one that the early Christians found in this account:

#1 The one chosen by God (the Messiah) will suffer.

The early church believed and proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the eternal Son of God who died on the cross and rose from the dead to accomplish our salvation.

People around them in the first century, especially Jewish opponents, said, “Wait a minute! How can Jesus be the Messiah, God’s chosen King? After all, he was condemned by the Jewish council and executed as an imposter and blasphemer. He died under the mocking title, ‘King of the Jews.’ He was betrayed by one of his best friends and wandered around the countryside like a nomad. He cannot be the Messiah.

In response, the Christians said, “Hey, what about David?” They noted that he was chosen by God but was still betrayed and had to endure suffering in the wilderness. David, as the future king, was the anointed one, the messiah with a

lower case “m”. Yet, for 10 years or so, he was the suffering messiah.

In a similar way, Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah with a capital “M”. He was chosen by God. Yes, like David he was betrayed and endured suffering in the wilderness. So, like David, he was the Suffering Messiah. But God has vindicated him by raising him from the dead. As Peter told the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost:

Acts 2:36 – “Therefore let everyone in Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

One of the big reasons the early Christians embraced Jesus as Lord and Messiah was that he fulfilled all sorts of Old Testament prophecies and was the obvious heir to David’s throne. This became a focus of their evangelistic message, as well as their apologetics as they defended their faith when it was challenged.

It is true that when dealing with Gentiles, with people who did not know or respect the authority of the Old Testament, their message was a bit different. Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17) is a clear example of that. Yet, even today, for those of us who believe that God speaks through the Bible, including through the Old Testament, the story of David continues to point to Jesus as Messiah.

Our text today should increase our confidence that he is indeed Lord and Messiah. This relationship between David as the lower case “m” messiah and Jesus as the capital “M,” Messiah is one we can point out to folks around us who are willing to listen to what God has to say to us in His Word.

And friend, if you are here this morning and are still uncertain about Jesus, about who he is and about the claims he made, I would encourage you to consider all the ways the Old Testament points to him. If you have questions about that, make sure you give me a call.

#2 The ones chosen by God (today called “Christians”) will suffer.

They will sometimes be betrayed, and they will sometimes wander around the wilderness as fugitives – at least in a figurative way.

We need to keep this in mind as we look out the window at other believers in Jesus who are going through a hard time.

When someone we know, for example, a co-worker or fellow student, is going through a hard time, it is very easy to start thinking, “Well, she must have done something to deserve this. People will reap what they sow, right?”

If Sue’s husband betrays her, leaves her for another woman, we may think, “Well, I wonder what kind of wife Sue really was. She seems like a nice gal, but you never know.”

Or when Joe gets laid off from his job, we think, “Yes, Joe says the company is downsizing, but there must be a reason they want to get rid of *him*. He probably was not doing his job very well.

Folks, these types of judgmental thoughts are never very helpful, but when they occur within the church, they can be a disaster!

“You know, I think if Sue would have really been following the Lord, her husband would have never left her.” Or, “I don’t know what it is, but I think there is some secret sin in Joe’s life. That’s why God let him lose that job.” Or, “You know, if Jane would just have more faith, God would heal her diabetes.”

Friends, those are *foolish statements!* They are judgmental, and they are wrong!

Just as God allowed his chosen ones, David and Jesus, to be betrayed and suffer, he will sometimes allow his chosen ones, his children, believers in Jesus to be betrayed and suffer.

Oh yes, sometimes (Hebrews 12), the Lord uses suffering as a form of discipline. Sometimes sinful or foolish choices on our part do, indeed, lead to suffering in our lives.

Yet, when we are looking out the window at the lives of other Christians, we should not be

making those judgments. Oh, sometimes our judgments might be correct, but we never really know. Why God allows one of his chosen ones, one of his children to suffer is knowledge he pretty much keeps to himself. None of us has a high-level division security clearance that makes us privy to such information.

We also need to keep in mind that the ones chosen by God will sometimes suffer and be betrayed *when we look in the mirror*. It is never fun to experience troubles or tragedies. Those times become even more difficult when we start having thoughts like, “God must be punishing me,” or, “The Lord has let me down,” or, “I guess I am going to have to take care of myself because God sure isn’t doing that.”

In our text today, we see David betrayed and running from Saul in the wilderness for years. This was happening, not because God was punishing him or because God had forgotten, forsaken or let him down. But rather, because God was using the suffering to accomplish his purposes in David’s life and in the nation of Israel.

Friend, when we find ourselves betrayed, wandering in a figurative wilderness or just going through a hard time, we probably will not know why God is allowing us to suffer. Yet, we should be encouraged by the fact that God is using our suffering to accomplish his purposes in our lives.

And friends, this includes betrayals. That can be one of the most painful experiences someone has to go through. A woman who had been betrayed by her husband (he had been sexually unfaithful) said: “I can forgive my husband. I think I can trust him because I don’t believe he would ever do it again, *but I just cannot get over the betrayal*.”

Now, whether this woman has truly forgiven her husband is questionable. My point, however, is that the pain of betrayal can feel deeper than almost any other wound in life.

When a spouse divorces or cheats on you, when a friend or sibling turns against you, when an adult child cuts off all communication, when

someone at church stabs you in the back, figuratively, *it can really hurt*.

During that time, you may think, “Why is this happening? I didn’t do anything wrong. God, where are you?”

In these times, I think the Lord says to us, “Remember David. Remember Jesus. They were betrayed. They didn’t deserve the things that happened to them.”

Yes, if you have been betrayed, you have been sinned against. That was wrong. Yet, God promises us two things:

1st He will use that betrayal to refine and strengthen our souls.

That can happen in a variety of ways. For one thing, betrayal sometimes saves us from an idolatrous relationship. I fear that far more frequently than we admit, many of us put too many eggs in a relationship basket. We expect too much from another person – specifically we expect him/her to do for us what only God is able to do.

Marriages, friendships, relationships between parents and children often are strained by unrealistic expectations where one person, maybe both, wants the other person to fill needs that only the Lord can really fill.

When you are in a relationship like that and you feel the other person has let you down or betrayed you, it is very painful. Yet, when betrayal rips that relationship from the center of our lives, we may then realize that it is really our relationship with God that belongs in the center of our lives. If that happens, the Lord has indeed used the betrayal to refine and strengthen us.

Now, we need to realize that this process doesn’t happen automatically. When you allow bitterness to infect your soul following a betrayal, your soul does not become more healthy. Instead, you become more and more miserable. Of course, there is no sin so great that God’s grace is not greater still. And when we finally realize what a horrible sin our

bitterness is, it often enables us to truly forgive those who have betrayed us.

And friend, whenever you are able to truly forgive someone who has wronged you, that will strengthen your soul and increase your joy.

The 2nd promise the Lord gives us is ultimate vindication.

If we truly have been wronged, God will make things right. Jesus says something that is very important for us to remember:

Matthew 5:11-12a – “You are blessed when (people) insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven.”

That is why we should be glad. I cannot tell you exactly what that reward looks like, but I can tell you it will be a reality.

If someone you trust betrays you, it hurts. But it is very encouraging to know that ultimately you will be vindicated. Sometimes that will happen in this life; other times in the next. But it will happen. We need to trust the Lord to keep this promise.

Now, that doesn't answer all of our questions as to why God lets us go through difficult times, but it sure helps.

May the Lord help us find encouragement in this today and in the days ahead.