

Part 14

1 Samuel 18–19

A Jealous King

Jewish men had to be at least twenty years old before they could go to war (Num. 1:3), but David was probably only eighteen when he was made a high-ranking officer in the Jewish army (18:5, NIV). From the beginning of his new assignment, David found himself in a life-threatening conflict with King Saul. David didn't *create* problems for Saul; he *revealed* the deep-seated problems that were already there. David was an honest man of faith, but Saul was a deceitful, scheming man of the world. With great humility David had accepted his appointment as Israel's next king, while Saul was almost paranoid as he tried to protect his throne. God had abandoned Saul but had given His Spirit's power to David, and David moved from victory to victory as he led Saul's troops. We can trace some of the major stages in Saul's growing opposition to David.

1. Saul wants David killed. (1 Sam. 18:1–12)

At one time, Saul loved David (16:21, "liked him very much," NIV), but the king's attitude changed into jealousy and then hatred. The Lord was with David (18:12, 14, 28), however, and Saul was not permitted to harm him. During the ten years or so that David was a fugitive, the Lord not only thwarted Saul's plans repeatedly, but He even used the king's hostility to mature David and make him into a man of courage and faith. While Saul was guarding his throne, David was being prepared for his throne.

Love (1 Sam. 18:1–4). Too many Bible readers still view David and Jonathan as two frolicsome teenagers who liked each other because they had many common interests, but this picture is shallow and inaccurate. Jonathan had to be at least twenty years old to be in his father's army, and the fact that Jonathan was already commanding one-third of that army and had won two great victories (13:1–4; 14:1ff) indicates that he was a seasoned soldier and not a callow adolescent. Some biblical chronologists calculate that there could have been an age difference of twenty-five to twenty-eight years between David and Jonathan.

Jonathan listened to his father and David converse, and after that interview, took David to his own heart with the kind of manly affection that comrades in arms understand.

To make anything more out of their friendship than the mature affection of two manly believers is to twist the Scriptures. Had there been anything unlawful in their relationship, the Lord certainly would never have blessed David and protected him, and David could never have written Psalm 18:19–27 ten years later.

Jonathan was Saul's eldest son, destined for the throne of Israel, and the Lord had already given it to David, so their friendship was certainly unique. When Jonathan gave his official garments and his armor to David, making him a friend and equal, Jonathan was acknowledging that David would one day take his place, so David must have told Jonathan about his anointing. The two friends covenanted that when David became king, Jonathan would be second in command (20:16–17, 42; 23:16–18), and David covenanted to protect Jonathan's family from being slain.

Saul wasn't pleased with his son's friendship with David. For one thing, Jonathan was Saul's best commander and was needed to make the king look good. Saul was also afraid that Jonathan would divulge court secrets to David, and when Saul discovered that David was already anointed to succeed him, this made matters worse. He saw David as an enemy, a threat to his own son's future, although Jonathan didn't view it that way. But when a leader nurtures himself on pride, jealousy and fear, he suspects everybody.

Popularity (1 Sam. 18:5–7). "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but a man is tested by the praise he receives" (Prov. 27:21, NIV). Just as the crucible and furnace test the metal and prepare it for use, so praise tests and prepares people for what God has planned for them. How we respond

to praise reveals what we're made of and whether or not we're ready to take on new responsibilities. If praise humbles us, then God can use us, but if praise puffs us up, we're not yet ready for a promotion.

In his attitudes, conduct, and service, David was a complete success, and Saul's servants and the Jewish people recognized this and praised him publicly. This popular acclaim started after David's stunning defeat of Goliath, when the army of Israel chased the Philistines for ten miles, defeated them, and took their spoils (1 Sam. 17:52ff). As Saul and his men returned to camp, the women met the victors and praised both Saul and David. In true Hebrew fashion, their praise was exaggerated, but in one sense it was true. David's victory over Goliath made it possible for the whole army of Israel to conquer the Philistines, so each soldier's achievement was really a triumph for David.

Envy and anger (1 Sam. 18:8–11). "It is a dangerous crisis when a proud heart meets with flattering lips," said John Flavel, seventeenth-century British Presbyterian clergyman and author. What the women sang didn't seem to affect David, but their song enraged Saul. Saul had already forfeited the kingdom (15:28), but he still asked, "What can he have more but the kingdom?" Saul's response to David's success was exactly opposite that of John the Baptist when he was told of the great success of Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Envy is a dangerous and insidious enemy, a cancer that slowly eats out our inner life and leads us to say and do terrible things. Proverbs 14:30 rightly calls it "the rottenness of the bones." Envy is the pain we feel within when somebody achieves or receives what we think belongs to us. Envy is the sin of successful people who can't stand to see others reach the heights they have reached and eventually replace them. By nature, we are proud and want to be recognized and applauded; and from childhood we have been taught to compete with others. Dr. Bob Cook often reminded us that everybody wears a sign that reads, "Please make me feel important." Much modern advertising thrives on envy as it cleverly contrasts the "haves" and the "have-nots" and urges the "have-nots" to buy the latest products and keep up with the "haves." Envious people max out their credit cards to buy things they don't need just to impress people who really don't care!

But envy easily leads to anger, and anger is often the first step toward murder (Matt. 5:21–26). This explains why Saul threw his spear at David while David was trying to soothe the king and help him overcome his depression. The Lord enabled David to escape, and when he returned to the king a second time, Saul only tried again to kill him. These two events probably occurred after the Goliath victory but before David was made an officer in the army, and yet David remained faithful to his king.

Fear (v. 12). The Lord protected His servant David from Saul's murderous hand, a fact that frightened Saul even more (vv. 15, 29). Surely Saul knew he was fighting a losing battle, for the Lord was on David's side but had departed from him. However, Saul kept up a brave front as he tried to impress his officers with his authority. Even if Saul missed his target, the people around him didn't miss the message he was sending: "Saul is king and he wants David to be killed."

2. Saul plots to have David killed. (1 Sam. 18:13–30)

"Faith is living without scheming," but Saul was better at scheming than at trusting God. If Saul disobeyed God, he always had a ready excuse to get himself out of trouble, and if people challenged his leadership, he could figure out ways to eliminate them. Possessed by anger and envy, and determined to hold on to his crown, Saul decided that young David had to be killed.

Saul sends David into battle (1 Sam. 18:13–16). Since David was an excellent soldier and a born leader, the logical thing was to give him assignments that would take him away from the camp where the enemy could kill him. Saul made David commander over 1,000 and sent him to fight the Philistines. If David was killed in battle, it was the enemy's fault; and if he lost a battle but lived, his popularity would wane. But the plan didn't work because David won all the battles! After all, the Lord was with him and the power of God was upon him. Instead of eliminating David or diminishing his

popularity, Saul's scheme only made him a greater hero to the people, and this increased Saul's fear of David all the more.

Saul demands an impossible feat (1 Sam. 18:17–27). Saul had promised to give one of his daughters in marriage to the man who killed Goliath (17:25), but this promise had not yet been fulfilled. The fact that David had killed Goliath wasn't enough, for Saul now expected David to "fight the battles of the Lord" in order to gain his wife, Saul's eldest daughter, Merab. Saul wasn't beneath using his own daughter as a tool to get rid of David. The details aren't given, but it seems that David had to fight a certain number of battles before the marriage could take place. Of course, the king was hoping that David would be slain during one of those battles, and then Saul would lose his enemy but still have his daughter. However, David humbly declined the offer, saying that his family wasn't worthy to be related to the king; so Saul gave Merab to another suitor.

Then Saul happily discovered that his younger daughter Michal was in love with David! Saul spoke to David about it and said he would give him a second chance to claim his reward. Once again David demurred, but Saul persisted. This time he asked selected servants to lie to David and tell him that Saul liked him and wanted him to marry Michal, and that Saul's attendants agreed with the proposal. But David put them off by telling the truth: he was from a lowly family and he didn't have any money to pay the bride price (Gen. 34:12; Ex. 22:16).

When David's reply was reported to Saul, the devious king saw in it a great opportunity to attack his enemies and get rid of David at the same time. Saul told his servants to tell David that all that the king required for a bride price was 100 foreskins from the "uncircumcised Philistines." Saul was certain that at some point in this endeavor, David would meet his death. Once again, Saul was using one of his daughters to help destroy an innocent man, and in this instance, it was a man she truly loved.

Whether the phrase "the appointed days" (1 Sam. 18:26) refers to a new deadline or the original deadline determined by Saul for Merab is really unimportant, because David and his men accomplished even more than

The phrase "David's men" is found frequently in the Samuel narrative (18:27; 23:3–5; 24:3; 25:12–13). It seems that some of his soldiers stayed with him and became his "crack troops" during the days of his exile. They considered it a high honor to be known as "David's men," and indeed it was.

Saul had asked. David once more survived the battles and he brought the king 200 foreskins. Another of Saul's schemes had failed and he had to give Michal to David as his wife.

Saul is even more afraid (1 Sam. 18:28–30). We have seen this pattern before (vv. 12, 15), but now Saul's twisted emotions so controlled him that he was obsessed with the desire to kill his son-in-law. David never considered Saul to be his enemy (Ps. 18 inscription), but Saul remained David's enemy until the day he died on the battlefield. David continued to fight the Lord's battles, and the Lord continued to give him great success and to magnify his name above the names of Saul's best officers. David certainly paid close attention to what God was doing in him and for him, and no doubt the remembrance of these events encouraged him during the difficult days of his exile. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

3. Saul looks for opportunities to have David killed. (1 Sam. 19:1–17)

Saul's mind and heart were so possessed by hatred for David that he openly admitted to Jonathan and the court attendants that he intended to have his son-in-law killed. Saul was now through with behind-the-scenes plots and was out to destroy David in the quickest way possible, and he ordered Jonathan and the royal attendants to join him in his endeavor. The hope of Israel lay in the heart and ministry of David, and yet Saul wanted to kill him! David would conquer Israel's enemies and consolidate the kingdom. He would gather much of the wealth used to build the temple. He would write psalms for the Levites to sing in praising God, and he would even design the musical instruments they played. God's covenant with David would keep the light shining in Jerusalem during

the dark days of the nation's decline, and the fulfillment of that covenant would bring Jesus Christ the Messiah into the world. No wonder Satan was so determined to kill David!

Jonathan's intervention (1 Sam. 19:1–10). Surely Saul knew that Jonathan would pass the word along to his beloved friend David, but perhaps that's what the king desired. If he couldn't kill David, perhaps he could so frighten him that he would leave the land and never be seen again. Jonathan did report the king's words to David and suggested that his friend hide in the field the next morning when Jonathan would speak with his father on behalf of David. It's remarkable that such a magnificent son could belong to such a wicked father! Had Jonathan been a selfish man, he could have helped to eliminate David and secure the crown for himself, but he submitted to the will of God and assisted David.

Jonathan presented his father with two arguments: (1) David was an innocent man who was not deserving of death, and (2) David had served Saul faithfully by winning great victories against Israel's enemies.

The shedding of innocent blood was a very serious crime in Israel. The six cities of refuge were set apart so that innocent people involved in manslaughter might not be treated as murderers (Deut. 19:1–10), and the ritual of the red heifer atoned for innocent blood shed by unknown murderers (Deut. 21:1–9). God hates the sin of shedding innocent blood (Prov. 6:16–17) and the prophets cried out against it (Isa. 59:7; Jer. 7:6; 22:17; 26:15). This was one of the sins that brought about the downfall in Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 21:16).

David was a valuable man to have around and he had never sinned against the king. Jonathan didn't mention that David was also very popular with the soldiers and the common people, because making such a statement would only have aroused the king's anger and envy. Saul was enjoying a sane moment and agreed with his son, and even took an oath not to kill David. Saul was a liar and his oaths were meaningless (14:24, 44), but this did open the way for David to return to court.

When the Philistines attacked Israel again, David went out with his men and soundly defeated them. This only aroused Saul's envy and anger and once again he tried to pin David to the wall (18:10–11). Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44), and because Saul was controlled by the evil one, he broke his oath and he threw his spear. David knew that the time had come for him to leave Saul's presence and hide, but first he went home to see his wife Michal. David would now begin about ten years of exile during which God would make a leader out of him.

Michal's deception (1 Sam. 19:11–17). Saul surmised that David would go home, so he sent men that night to watch David's house and kill him when he came out the next morning. Knowing her father's thought processes, Michal urged David to get out that night and flee to a place of safety. She let him down through a window and arranged a dummy in the bed by using an idol and some goats' hair. What Michal was doing with an pagan idol (teraphim) is a mystery, especially one as large as a man. (Rachel hid two teraphim under a saddle—Gen. 31:33–35.) It's possible that the idol was only a bust and that she used it and the goats' hair for the head and used pillows to simulate the body. Michal was still depending on idols while married to a man after God's own heart, and like her father, she was a schemer.

While Michal was scheming, David was praying and trusting the Lord, and Psalm 59 came out of this experience. As you read this psalm, you see Saul's spies running here and there and waiting for David to emerge from his house, and you hear David comparing them to snarling dogs lurking in the city streets. But David's faith was in the Lord, for only the Lord could be his defense and his refuge. This doesn't mean that David rejected any plans for escape, because the Lord uses human means to accomplish His divine ends; but it does mean that David's faith was not in himself or in Michal's schemes, but in the Lord of the armies of Israel.

In the morning, when the agents demanded that Michal surrender her husband, she told them he was sick, and when they reported this to Saul, he told the men to bring him David, bed and all! But when

they picked up the bed, the truth was revealed, and Michal was reproved by her father for being so deceptive, but she was only following his example! Like her father, she lied and claimed that David had threatened to kill her if she didn't cooperate.

4. Saul himself goes to kill David. (1 Sam. 19:18–24)

David fled to Samuel in Ramah, a godly friend he knew he could depend on, and Samuel took him to the fellowship of the prophets where they could worship God and seek His face. The word *naioth* means “dwellings” and was probably a section in Ramah where the “school of the prophets” assembled. There Samuel and David could worship and pray and ask God for wisdom, and the prophets would pray with them. But Saul's spies were everywhere and they reported to Saul where he could find David. The king sent three different groups of soldiers to capture David, but when they arrived at the place where the prophets had assembled, they were immediately possessed by the Spirit and began to praise and worship God! The Hebrew word translated “prophecy” can mean “to sing songs and praise God” as well as “to foretell events.” Saul's soldiers didn't become prophets; they only uttered words inspired by the Spirit of God. God protected David and Samuel, not by sending an army but by sending the Holy Spirit to turn warriors into worshipers. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4, NIV).

Three groups of soldiers had failed, so Saul decided to go to Ramah himself. David's presence in Ramah was no secret because the people at the great cistern knew where he and Samuel were and they told Saul. Perhaps the entire town knew that some kind of “spiritual revival” was taking place at the school of the prophets. Saul hastened to the place only to be met by the Spirit of God and made to praise the Lord. He took off his outer royal garments and became like any other man, and he lay on the floor before Samuel. This would be their last meeting until that fateful night when Samuel came from the realms of the dead to pass judgment on the king (1 Sam. 28:7ff).

But Saul had had a similar experience after Samuel had anointed him king (10:9–13), and from it came the proverbial saying, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” After Saul's experience at Ramah, the proverb was resurrected. These two events prove that a person can have a remarkable religious experience and yet have no change in character. In Saul's case, both experiences were actually sent by the Lord, but Saul didn't profit from them. Special religious manifestations aren't evidences that a person is even saved (Matt. 7:21–23). Judas preached sermons and even performed miracles (Matt. 10:1–8), yet he was not a believer (John 6:67–71; 13:10–11; 17:12), and he betrayed the Lord and ended up committing suicide. Saul, like Judas, had many opportunities to see the Lord's hand at work, and yet he never had a life-changing experience with the Lord.

While Saul was occupied at the school of the prophets, David slipped away from Ramah and went to meet Jonathan somewhere near Gibeah. David and Jonathan would make one final effort at reconciliation with Saul, and it would almost cost Jonathan his life. Saul was a “double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8, NKJV). He would try to rule the land and defeat the Philistines while at the same time chasing David and seeking to kill him. The longer David eluded him, the more fanatical Saul became, until finally he ended his own life on the battlefield, lacking the help of the one man who could have given him victory.