

“Soft Music for a Hard Heart”
Sermon Series on *The Life of David* #2
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
(1 Sam. 16:14-23)
June 10, 2018

Introduction.

Have you ever had a time in your life when you heard a song and it reminded you of a person or a time in your life which was very special. Perhaps you were in a season of grief, and the song reminded you of someone you lost. Or maybe you were traveling far away from home, and a song came on the radio that reminded you of how you met your spouse and fell in love. Or perhaps you were just struggling in life and God used a hymn or a song of praise in a worship service to reassure you that He hadn't lost track of you and that He would be with you no matter how hard life felt.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I heard the song *Moon River* playing on the sound system of the restaurant I was in, and a flood of memories came over me. (Do those of you old enough remember that song?) You see, *Moon River* was my mother's favorite song, and hearing it I was transported back in time. I was filled with warm memories of life growing up in my home, and I thought about all the reasons I loved her so much. My mother has been gone for almost 14 years, but just hearing that song made me think of her in the most wonderful way. And it felt like it was just yesterday when she would listen to that song.

Music can play a powerful role in our lives, and it's one of God's unique gifts which can penetrate the mind and touch heart like nothing else. It can also be a tool in the hand of God to soothe a weary soul, and we read of an example of this in the passage before us this morning. As we consider these things today, there are three matters I want to highlight from the text: the spiritual malady of Saul; the unique ability of David; and the effective ministry of music.

I. The Spiritual Malady of Saul.¹

In a blog on the subject of the lure of the dark side, author and theologian Mark Roberts² says that perhaps no biblical character is more like Anakin Skywalker of *Star Wars* fame than Saul, son of Kish, the first king of Israel. Like Anakin, Saul began his life in very humble circumstances, and he was the son of a common man from the smallest of the tribes of Israel (1 Sam. 9:21). And like Anakin, Saul possessed very impressive personal gifts, including a handsome appearance and an

imposing height. Both men were born leaders, and partly for this reason both were chosen to be champions in the battle against evil.

However, Roberts says that both men also began their slide to "the dark side" early on. You may recall that in Episode II of the *Star Wars* films, Anakin let his anger overpower him when he killed the Sand People. In Saul's case, his downfall began when he prepared to face the Philistines in battle (1 Sam. 13:1-15). You'll recall that the prophet Samuel told Saul to wait until he joined the king, so that Samuel could offer sacrifices to God on Israel's behalf. However, when Samuel didn't arrive according to the king's expectations, Saul grew impatient and he raced ahead and made the sacrificial offering to God himself, something he wasn't supposed to do (v. 9). When Samuel arrived, he rebuked the king for having failed to keep God's commandment (v. 13), and the prophet said that in time God would raise up someone other than Saul to be king.

The book of 1 Samuel records the slow and sad demise of Saul. In our passage today, he was agitated by an evil spirit and could find relief only when a young shepherd named David played music for him (1 Sam. 16:14-23). Yet, as we shall see later in the story, Saul repeatedly tried to kill David when he realized that the young man was the one who was going to be, by God's design, the future king of Israel. Even though David spared Saul's life on more than one occasion, the king couldn't control his jealous anger against the young man.

By the end of his life, Saul was so cut off from the Lord that he actually consulted a medium looking for supernatural direction, even though he knew it was forbidden by God to do this in the OT law (1 Sam. 28). In the end Saul was wounded in battle against the Philistines, and he fell on his own sword (1 Sam. 29). As Mark Roberts writes, "Saul's turn to 'the dark side' was complete, and [it was] completely tragic."

At this point in the story, we're told that "*the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him*" (1 Sam. 16:14). There are two things I want you to notice about this. The first has to do with the Spirit departing from Saul. In the Old Testament, before the coming of Christ and subsequently the sending God's Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit was given to the people of God only on occasion and intermittently.

That's why we read in Psalm 51 where David requested, "*Do not cast me away from Your presence and take not Your Holy Spirit from me.*" During this time in biblical history the Holy Spirit was given only on occasion, and it could be taken away. Here we read that God withdrew the blessing and power of His Holy Spirit because of Saul's disobedience. God rejected the king and He chose another, and the Lord withdrew His Spirit.

For those of us who know and follow Christ now, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit is a permanent gift which is given to all believers, and none of us have to

worry about this happening to us. Jesus promised never to leave us or forsake us, and it's by His Holy Spirit that He fulfills that very promise. God's Spirit remains with us even when we might not feel it. But that wasn't the case for Saul.

The second thing I want you to notice is this intriguing statement – that God *sent* an evil spirit to torment Saul. The malady with which the king wrestled was not merely an inward feeling of depression. It also involved an evil power which robbed him of his peace of mind and at times drove him to despair. It's somewhat troubling to read these words and learn that God does allow and even at times directs the tormenting ministry of evil spirits on occasion.

Why would God do this? I don't know. I don't think anyone really knows. But it's clear that in the sovereignty of God, the Lord used even this evil spirit to be part of His judgment against the rejected king and to orchestrate a plan to bring David into the king's court for a purpose. God used even this to work His will in the world.

I'm convinced that the mental and emotional maladies with which we wrestle from time to time are caused by a combination of things. Some of them are psychological and emotional, and some of them are physical and related to chemistry. But some of them are ultimately spiritual in their origin, as here in the case of Saul. I believe it's very important for us to try to distinguish the source and trace the cause of our emotional and mental struggles whenever we battle depression so we can get the right help we need.

Several years ago, I found myself in a malaise spiritually and emotionally. It became so acute that my late wife Lorie suggested I was living in Malaise-ia! (Get it?) Much of my problem was simply physical; I was tired. Some of the problem was relational, because I was in conflict with a particular person. But I'm convinced some of it was also spiritual. Thankfully, my spirits lifted in a remarkable way when I was able to get a break from work. The rest did me so much good, and spending time with some dear friends at a conference was also particularly helpful. When I came home from the conference Lorie asked me, "Have you returned from Malaise-ia yet?!" I said, "Yes, honey, I have!"

All of us encounter times in our lives, even seasons, when we're emotionally and spiritually down. Maybe you're in a season like that right now. Don't just spiral down lower and lower into your depression. Get some help. See a counselor, talk to your doctor, meet with a pastor or a trusted friend, trace out the cause and get the help you need. You don't have to go it alone. In the case of Saul, it was the ministry of music from the hand of a young man named David which provided the relief he needed, and it made a great deal of difference.

II. The Unique Ability of David.

After David was anointed to be the next king of Israel, he went back to tending the flocks of his father Jesse. And it would be another 20 years before David was actually crowned king. In the meantime, God had a plan for developing this king-in-waiting until the time came for him to assume the throne. David's first job in preparation for this was making music and attempting to reestablish order in Saul's disordered mind and heart.

The harp David played was probably a small handheld-instrument in the form of a flat-sounding box with two wooden arms joined by a cross-piece. The strings were stretched from the box to the cross-piece. (There is a drawing on the screens which depicts a harp similar to the one David played.) Apparently, David was quite skilled at playing the instrument, and from the number of psalms in the Bible he wrote, we gather he was a prolific composer. Did you know that half of the psalms in Scripture were written by David?

The text also tells us that David was handsome and well-spoken, and he was a brave warrior. However, the most important part of the report from the servant to Saul was that the Lord was with David. God's favor was on this young man, and it marked him in a significant way. The king had his messengers send for David, and Jesse sent his youngest son to present gifts to the king. This is how David came to live and work in the king's court. God engineered the circumstances of his life to bring him into the king's court, and this was how he would learn what was involved in being the king himself later on.

Every one of us has God-given talents and abilities, as well as spiritual gifts, which we can use in the work of God's kingdom. You may have a talent to organize, build, or design things. You may have the gift of gab, or the ability to crunch numbers. You may have the spiritual gift of mercy, the gift of generosity or the gift of helps as recorded in Scripture. Or you may be able to sing or play an instrument like our friends in the choir or on the worship team. In whatever way God has created and gifted you, these things can be used in the kingdom of God.

How are you using your gifts and talents for the Lord? In what way are they being put to use for God's kingdom? David put his gift of music to use in the service of the Lord and the service of the king, and his unique ability brought relief to a weary soul and a tormented mind. We would do well to follow his example in making our talents and gifts available in the service of Christ.

III. The Effective Ministry of Music.

Pastor and author Chuck Swindoll once wrote³ that whatever our individual tastes might be, there's something about music that soothes and ministers to us. It goes all the way back to the first genealogical record in Scripture where we read that Jubal "*was the father of all those who play the lyre and the pipe*" (Gen. 4:21).

Music has a unique ability to minister to the soul, and we see evidence of this in our passage today. Whenever the evil spirit tormented Saul, David would take his harp and play, and relief would come to the king.

This story reminds me of the ministry of musicians during 9/11. You may recall that in the aftermath of the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, students from the Juilliard Conservatory played at the Armory in New York City where the families of the missing came to register on the day after the disaster. For hours these talented young classical artists played chamber music in the middle of all the grief and the grime.

Finally, all but one of the musicians had to leave, and a young man named William Harvey was left alone with his violin. A man in fatigues who introduced himself as Sergeant Major asked if Bill would mind continuing to play for his soldiers as they came back from digging through the rubble at Ground Zero. Bill agreed and proceeded to play everything he could from memory: Bach, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Paganini, and Vivaldi. When he ran out of his classical repertoire, he played My Country Tis of Thee, Turkey in the Straw, and Amazing Grace.

Reflecting on this event, the young violin student wrote the following, “Never have I played for a more grateful audience. Somehow it didn't matter that by the end, my intonation was shot and I had no bow control. I would have lost any competition I was playing in, but it didn't matter. The men would come up the stairs in full gear, remove their helmets, look at me, and smile....

“By this time, it was 11:30 p.m., and I didn't think I could play anymore. I asked Sergeant Major if it would be appropriate if I played the National Anthem. He shouted above the chaos of the soldiers and called them to attention, and I played the National Anthem as the 300 men of the 69th Division saluted an invisible flag....

“As I rode the taxi back to Juilliard that night...I was numb. Not only was this evening the proudest I've ever felt to be an American, it was also my most meaningful as a musician and a person.... I've never understood so fully what it means to communicate music to other people... Words only go so far.”⁴

For many years Will Willimon was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. In one of his books he tells the story of a visit he made one afternoon to the office of a lawyer in his congregation. It was just a drop-in visit. Will said he didn't know the man very well – his wife seemed to bear the interest in the church for the family.

Will asked the man how his day had been, and the lawyer replied, “It's been a typical day – full of misery!” He went on to describe all the heartache and conflict that were involved in the cases he dealt with that day. Then the man said, “Which helps explain why I'm in your church on a Sunday morning.”

Will replied, "I'm a bit overwhelmed. What on earth do I have to say in a sermon which might be helpful to you?"

The man answered, "Oh, it's not the sermon that I come for, preacher. It's the music. I sometimes go a whole week with nothing beautiful in my life and very little good, until Sunday. Sometimes, when that choir sings, it is for me the difference between life and death."⁵

Conclusion.

To our friends who sing in the choir and play instruments and direct the music at the 8:45 service, and to the worship team that leads the music at the 11 o'clock service, thank you for all you do in the cause of Christ. Thank you for putting to a holy purpose the gift God has given you. When the Holy Spirit accompanies your melody with His power and His blessing, for some of us it may be the difference between life and death. So play and sing well. Take us to the throne of heaven. Lift our gaze from our problems here on earth to the brighter hope we have in Christ, and remind us of the truths of Scripture which too often we forget. Thanks be to God for your ministry among us!

And to the rest of us, how will we use our gifts and talents in the service of Christ in the coming week? In what way will we make ourselves available to people who are hurting and need the Savior? Who do you know that is it that is spiraling down into depression and needs your ministry of grace and love? Ask God to show you, and He will. David used his talents to minister to Saul, and for him it was the difference between life and death, too. Amen.

¹ Charles Swindoll, *David: A Story of Passion and Destiny*, pp. 26-34. I got the title for the sermon as well as the three main points of the message from this book.

² Mark Roberts, www.markroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/luredarkside.htm.

³ Charles Swindoll, p. 26.

⁴ Source unknown.

⁵ Will Willimon, "The Gothic Spirit," <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/sermons/090896.htm>