

1 Samuel 18:6-19:24

'A Hell of Choices'

Pictures of hell

It is widely considered to be the central epic poem of Italian literature.

It is the last great work of literature of the Middle Ages and the first great work of the Renaissance.

It has had a profound influence on how we Christians view the afterlife.

I'm speaking, of course, about Dante's work *The Divine Comedy*.

Dante's poem begins on Good Friday of the year 1300.

Dante is thirty five years old, half of the biblically allotted age of 70.

He is lost in a dark wood, surrounded by various beasts and unable to find his way.

Eventually he is rescued by Virgil after his love, Beatrice, intercedes on his behalf.

After the rescue Dante and Virgil begin their journey to the underworld.

After some preliminaries, they pair enter hell and Virgil guides Dante through the nine circles of hell.

The circles are concentric.

Each new circle represents greater evil.

The height of evil is in the centre of the earth, where Satan is bound and held.

The first circle is Limbo, the place of the unbaptised and virtuous pagans.

Such are not punished in an active sense.

They simply cannot reach heaven and are shut out of God's presence for eternity.

The second circle consists of those overcome by lust.

These are trapped in a violent storm.

The third circle are gluttons.

They are forced to lie in the mud under continual cold rain and hail.

The fourth circle are the hoarders and wasters.

They are forced to strain against weights and charge at each other over and over again.

The fifth circle consists of two groups.

The wrathful must fight each other in the swamp-like water of the river Styx.

The sullen are trapped beneath the water.

And as the circles rise in number the variations of people grow and the punishments become more awful.

I wonder what you think of when you think of hell.

Is it flames?

Is it cold?

Is it dark?

Where is it?

Who is there?

What is it like?

Well, in my own mind as I studied the passage that we are looking at tonight I began to think that Saul's existence reminded me a little of what hell might be like.

His existence here begins to assume some of the characteristics of hell on earth.

Come with me.

Let's explore this text together.

And let's see what God can tell us about himself.

And perhaps at the end we might get a glimpse of the horror of hell and how to avoid it.

The aftermath of the Philistine (1 Samuel 18:6-30)

Incident 1 (18:6-9)

Verse 6 sets the context.

It talks about the death of the Philistine, Goliath.

The battle is freshly finished.

Their troops are on their way home.

Everyone is overjoyed.

The women from all the towns of Israel come out to meet their King.

They are thrilled with the victory that has been won.

And their song rings out.

It is a song that uses typical Hebrew parallelism.

It is not designed to be about numbers but about a stunning victory (cf. Deuteronomy 32:30).

It is not designed to insult the king that they are coming out to meet and praise.

It is simply a lavish song of praise for Saul and David together.

But Saul is a man who craves attention.

He cares what the people think about him.

And he has demonstrated himself to be very battered in his psyche already.

And so he reads it as an insult.

And perhaps he wonders if David might be the replacement King that Samuel had mentioned in 1 Samuel 15:28.

Perhaps this David is the neighbour who is better than him.

Saul's reading of the poem has very little poetry and quite a lot of Saul (Fokkelman, page 220).

Look at Saul in verse 8.

⁸*Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him.*

He said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands;

what more can he have but the kingdom?"

We have already seen Saul becoming isolated from his people.

Here he cannot even share in their joy.

He does not even speak to the women.

He speaks of them in the third person.

And he withdraws into his jealousy.

Verse 9 indicates that from this day on he eyes David.

And we cannot help but wonder if the eye is green with jealousy.

Incident 2 (18:10-16)

This brings us the second incident in chapter 19.

Day one was the return from battle and the poem.

Day two brings fresh evil.

Day one was about an explosion in words.

Day two concerns an explosion in violence.

In chapter 16 of 1 Samuel we heard that David was anointed as future king.

We also heard that the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him.

At the same time, the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul and an evil spirit tormented him.

David was employed to play the lyre for Saul.

And David's playing brought relief to Saul and the evil spirit would depart.

But now David's playing brings mixed things.

The playing brings relief.

But the player brings threat.

And so in the confusion of his emotions, Saul hurls his weapons at David.

But David eludes him twice.

Now look at verses 12 to 16.

They capture Saul's isolation.

The Lord is with David but not with Saul.

So Saul removes him and makes him an army commander.

Perhaps he hopes that this lad will not be equal to the task and will be killed in battle.

But David meets with success at the hand of the Lord.

And where Saul is increasingly isolated from his people, the love of the people is increasingly toward David.

Incident 3 (18:17-30)

The third incident involves Saul and David again.

Part of the deal with beating Goliath had been marriage into the royal family (17:25).

Now Saul offers David his first daughter.

David does the correct political thing and speaks deferentially.

The wedding is arranged.

But on the eve of the wedding, the Saul's opposition to David results in him giving his daughter to another man.

In verse 20 we get a very unusual verse in the Old Testament.

This verse contains the only reference in Old Testament narrative to a woman loving a man.

Michal loves David.

And Saul hears about it.

And he decides to use his daughter as a political tool.

She may enter the house of David and Saul's hope is that she might be a snare for him.

[Note Fokkelman's translation of 'a second time'.]

Now there are few ways in which Michal might be a snare¹ for David.

But it seems as though Saul has in mind that she might be a snare to him in the sense of causing him injury.

Saul goes on to make this clear in the second half of verse 21 where he goes on to say 'and the hand of the Philistines may be against him'.

In verses 22 and 23 Saul commands his agents to take a message to David about becoming his son-in-law.

David does the political correct thing and is deferential again.

After all, the king is from a wealthy family and he is from a poor family.

The king has a good genealogy but he has a genealogy that is not so good, particularly given that it has Moabite blood in it.

Saul's response is to demand a costly dowry.

David is to bring a hundred foreskins of the Philistines.

David quickly obliges.

The Hebrew text of the Old Testament says that he does better than Saul demands.

He comes back with two hundred foreskins.

And Michal is given to David.

We are never told in 1 and 2 Samuel that David returns Michal's love.

In fact, David treats her like a political pawn just like her father does here.

In verse 12 we were told that Saul feared David.

Now we are told that Saul's daughter loves him.

On top of that Saul realises that the Lord is with David.

¹ The word used for snare here is used in the Pentateuch to describe idolatry (Exodus 23:33; 34:12; Deuteronomy 7:16). Chapter 19 tells us that Michal has idols in her house. Perhaps she will be a snare to David in the religious area. However, the term is also used in other places for a trap or cause of injury (e.g. Exodus 10:7; Joshua 23:13; Psalm 141:9; Isaiah 8:15; Amos 3:5) and the connection with the Philistines here seems to imply this usage.

And so verse 29 tells us that Saul fears David even more.

And David becomes his enemy.

And the rest of the book of 1 Samuel will catalogue how this enmity works itself out.

Escapes and Protection

Jonathan (19:1-7)

But let's quickly move on to chapter 19.

Chapter 19 outlines three deliverances or acts of protection that are exercised toward David in the face of Saul's enmity and fear.

In verses 1 to 7, Jonathan hears the talk about killing David.

Jonathan relays this to David.

Jonathan then intercedes for David with his father.

Three times, Jonathan mentions sin.

He mentions sin against David.

And he mentions David's innocence and lack of sin.

In verse 6 we are told that Saul heeds the voice of Jonathan.

And look at what he does in the second half of the verse.

He swears an oath in Yahweh's name.

As the Lord Lives, he shall not be put to death.

Now Jonathan should know better than to trust Saul's oaths.

After all, he was the brunt of one of those backfired oaths himself.

Nevertheless, he does trust Saul's oath.

David does return to the court of Saul.

But the following verses indicate that it is not long before Saul attempts to take the name of the Lord in vain.

Within a few short verses he is attempting to kill David again.

Michal (19:8-17)

Verses 1 to 7 tell us about one child of Saul who loves David more than Saul.

Verses 8 through to 17 tells us of another child of Saul who loves David more than Saul.

David continues to fight the Philistines and be victorious.

The evil spirit from the Lord continues to afflict Saul.

And again David's music is sought for relief.

But again the music is a mixed blessing because it comes from the hand of David.

And so Saul lashes out again with a spear.

And David flees.

David flees home to his wife, Michal.

And Michal's love for her husband causes her to act against her father.

She sends David off through a window.

She then takes the household idols and puts them where David should be.

As Rachel deceived her father with household idols, so Michal deceives her father.

In Psalm 59, David remembers this threat and deliverance.

He remembers that he was not guilty of any sin and yet Saul stirred up strife against him.

He called upon God to rouse himself, to come to his help and to see his plight.

And he celebrated that God was his fortress and refuge.

His God, not Michal and not the idols of Michal was the source of his triumph over his enemies.

Samuel (19:18-24)

The final incident describes David's flight to Samuel.

Samuel had anointed both Saul and David.

And Samuel had disputed with God about Saul's rejection.

But Samuel was also well aware that God's purposes lay with David.

And so Samuel became the first of many people that David would take refuge with.

Saul sends messengers.

And God sides with David by throwing the messengers into a prophetic trance.

Then Saul himself goes.

And his journey to Samuel at the beginning of his career is repeated.

At the beginning of his career the Spirit came upon him as validation of his appointment as king.

But now the spirit of God comes upon him in a reversal.

Now God uses the prophetic frenzy to protect the new anointed one and to sign, seal, and deliver Saul's rejection.

Saul's isolation is complete as he strips his clothes off.

The king of Israel lies naked and humiliated for a day and a night.

And David escapes again.

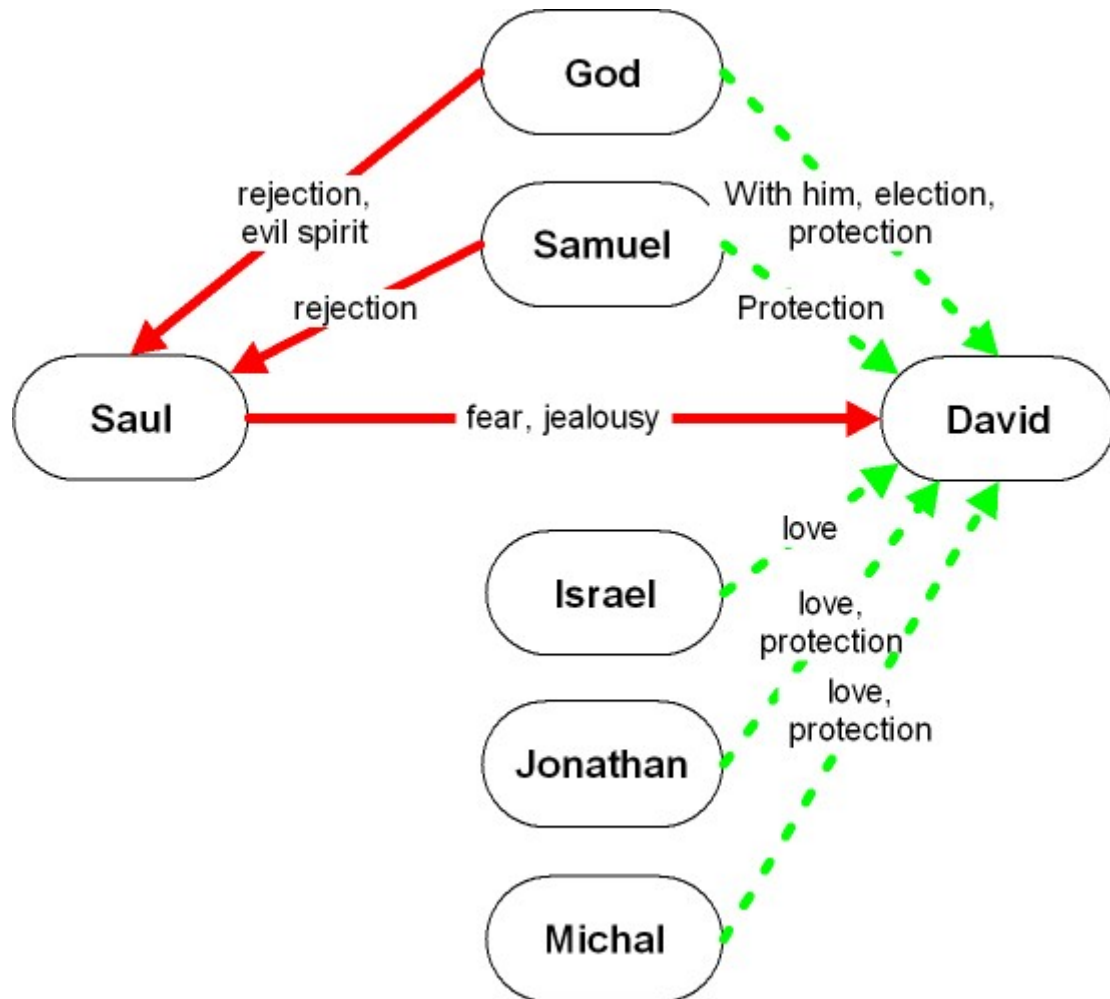
Given him over...

Saul's isolation

I want to spend a moment reflecting on Saul and his relationships here.

There is an intricate network of relationships within this story.

Let's see if we can demonstrate them in a diagram.



In the diagram the red solid lines represent an antagonistic relationship.

The green dotted lines represent a favourable relationship.

With this in mind, look at where Saul finds himself.

At the beginning of Saul's career he found himself in the following position.

God was for him.

Samuel was for him.

And Israel was for him.

But now, his fortunes have been radically turned around.

A new face has appeared on the horizon in the shape of David.
And as this story has progressed we have seen Saul watch David.
We have seen his eye on him.
We have seen him become jealous.
And we have seen him become proud.
Saul has set himself against David.
But throughout the story we have seen God's favour rest on David.
Even though Saul does not know it for certain, we know that David is God's elect.
But even Saul knows that God is with him and God protects him.
What's more, Saul knows that God is against him.
He knows this because God's prophet has told him that he has been rejected by God.
He knows this because of the withdrawal of the Spirit of the Lord.
He knows this because of the presence of the evil spirit.
And he knows this because of the incident when the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and drives him into a prophetic frenzy in order to protect David.
And then there is Saul's relationship with Samuel.
Samuel was a good friend and mentor.
But Samuel has become distant and inaccessible.
And Samuel has been the mechanism by which Saul has been rebuked and rejected by God.
Samuel here also sides with David and offers him protection.
And then there is Israel.
Israel is not negative toward Saul.
But Israel loves David.
They see him as a man who loves God and God's honour.
We saw that with Goliath last week.

But they also see him as a warrior who can win against the Philistines.

And then there is Saul's own family.

He has a son who identifies with David's passion for God and the people of God.

He delights in David.

And he defends David before his father.

Saul also has a daughter who is passionately in love with David.

She protects David.

She sets herself against her father's will for David's sake.

The Lord was with him...

Can you see what is going on here?

We who read Samuel know that God's purposes are tied up with David.

David might not be mighty.

David may be poor.

David might be from mixed stock.

But God is for David.

David is God's anointed.

And Hannah has taught us in 1 Samuel 2 that he will guard the feet of his faithful ones.

She has taught us that not by might does one prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord will be shattered.

He will give strength to his king.

He will exalt the power of his anointed.

Saul has refused to line himself up with God's purposes.

He is an outsider.

He started by simply rejecting God's commands.

But now he has rejected God's purposes.
And God appears to have given him up to his own desires.
He has allowed him to choose his way.
And the end result is terrifying.
The end result is incredible isolation.
Saul is in a living hell.
Isolated from God.
Isolated from all that is God's.
Isolated in his own rejection of God and God's purposes.
And this rejection has begun to filter into every aspect of his existence.
It has begun to break relationships.
It has begun to cause irrational actions.
But this is what God allows.
God gives us this freedom.
He allows us to resist his purposes and defy his decrees.
He gives us up to our sinful urgings.
Romans 1 tells us this.
And it tells us that the result is terrifying.
And where God is for someone then everyone against that person is

God's anointed

Friends, I want to close with two comments.
The first comment is that there are incredible links between David and Jesus.
Like David, Jesus is God's anointed.
Like David, Jesus was the object of jealousy and enmity.

Like David, Jesus was opposed by the leaders in Israel in his own day.

As David is pictured as innocent here, so Jesus was totally innocent.

As David was protected here, so Jesus was protected for a time.

However, eventually he was overcome on the cross.

But God turned this apparent defeat into glorious victory.

God triumphed over evil through him and his death on the cross.

Friends, God is for this Jesus.

He is the Lord's anointed.

Through him God's purposes will flow.

Choices

Friends, this means that we must make choices.

We are faced with the same choices that Saul and Samuel and Jonathan and Michal faced.

We can line up with God or we can set ourselves against God.

To set ourselves against God is to set us on a trajectory that can only lead to isolation from God and all that is good.

It might last for a while.

It might even look good for a while.

But its end will be the hell of isolation from God and all that is good.

The other choice is to line ourselves up with God's purposes in Christ.

We do this by putting our faith and confidence in Jesus.

We do it by trusting that his death is a death for sin.

We do it by living a life that continually lines up with him.

We do it by loving him and following him.

And God promises that for those who choose this life there can be only be victory and life.

For to line up with Jesus is to line up with God is to line up with eternity.

Listen to Paul reflect on this in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-12:

⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering

.⁶For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,⁷ and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

⁹These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,¹⁰ when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Friends, with this in mind, we can go on a pray for each other what Paul prays for the Thessalonians.

¹¹To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith,¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.