

1 Samuel 20:1-22:23

‘Living with God’s Purposes’

Strange Bedfellows

A storm breaks out.

The ship is wrecked.

And Trinculo the jester is thrown up on an island.

And as the storm rages on, the jester searches for a place to hide.

And so he comes upon Caliban, a deformed native.

Caliban is wrapped in a big, loose-fitting cloak, a gaberdine.

He is cowering against the storm.

He perceives Trinculo to be an evil spirit and freezes in fear.

For his part, Trinculo mistakes the deformed Caliban for some big fish.

But then he sees Caliban’s arms and legs.

He is reassured that this is a human.

And so he seeks shelter.

Creeping into the shelter of the gabardine, he mutters to himself:

‘Alas, the storm is come again. My best way is to creep under the gabardine; there is no shelter hereabout: misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.’

And from such a line in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a host of adaptations has come.

The most famous has been in the world of politics.

And so in 1850 Charles Warner noted that in the world of politics circumstances often force enemies to work together.

Antagonists form alliances that seem contrary to fundamental beliefs.

They are unlikely, even unholy, alliances.

For politics makes strange bedfellows.

Friends, today we enter one of the most hectic stages in the story of Saul and David.

Saul is king over Israel.

But God has rejected him.

In his place, the Lord has anointed a young shepherd boy as future king.

This young shepherd is astute and sharp.

He is a gifted warrior.

And he has a love for Yahweh.

But he is still not king.

And in the world of politics that will wage for many years, strange alliances are made.

The people caught up in this story find themselves in bed with stranger partners.

Some of these alliances are good and great.

Others are unholy and demonic.

Today we are going to have a look at a few of these people.

And as we do, we are going to reflect on how our faith affects our relationships.

We are going to find in David and Saul some deep truths about the impact of God's purposes on our lives.

So, come with me into the world of ancient Israel.

Turn with me to 1 Samuel 20.

First, let's take a quick overview of the contents of chapters 20-22.

An overview of the contents

Friends and a Covenant (1 Samuel 20:1-42)

The first episode in the story takes the whole of chapter 20.

Here we meet two young men.

Jonathan is the son of King Saul.

He is the future king by inheritance.

But David is the future king by God's election.

There are four sections in the story and I've put them in the sermon outline for you.

In the first section David is clearly worried and alarmed.

Jonathan seems to think David is a bit paranoid.

But David has an uncanny ability to weigh people up.

And so he and Jonathan work out a way to test the rightness of David's thesis.

In the second section they move from the court to the field.

Jonathan chooses David over his father.

In verse 14 he senses that David will triumph in the conflict with his father.

He knows that in the world of politics, expediency wins.

And in the world of ancient politics, a new king must get rid of rival claimants to the throne.

And so Jonathan asks David to act like God when that time comes.

He asks him to act with surprising and unexpected kindness and love.

He requests that David protect him and his family.

And so the two friends make a covenant.

Their love issues in a contractual commitment.

Finally, in verses 18-23, the men arrange how they will communicate what Jonathan finds out.

In verse 24 we switch back to the court.

Now, the key to understanding this section is found in the references to eating, sitting, and standing.

You see, in the ancient world, friendship was expressed in sitting down and eating with someone.

But I want you to notice what happens here.

Look at verse 24.

Saul is at a feast.

He is sitting.

His general, Abner, is sitting.

But Jonathan is standing.

Jonathan appears to have been convinced by David.

His allegiances are going against nature.

Saul looks for David but cannot find him.

He puts up with this for part of the feast.

But then his anger bursts out.

He takes it out on Jonathan.

He points out that Jonathan is putting his own future at stake.

And then he acts toward his own son in the same way that he has acted toward David.

In a fit of anger, he hurls his spear.

And the second closes with verse 34.

Jonathan rises again.

He refuses to eat.

His alliances clearly lie with David.

He is grieved for David.

And he is offended at his father's disgrace of David.

Now let's move back to the final section of this chapter.

In verse 34 we are back in the field.

An elaborate ritual is enacted.

The friends, allies, and covenant partners part.

David, the anointed and future king bows three times before Jonathan.

They embrace each other and weep over each other.

And they part with a covenant sworn in the name of Yahweh.

The Help of a Priest (1 Samuel 20:1-9)

In chapter 20 David flees in an unlikely direction.

He flees westward to Nob.

We can't help wondering if he is on a specific errand.

This is a time when metal was rare in Israel.

And David has just become a fugitive from the king.

He is a warrior without a weapon.

Anyway, he arrives at Nob.

He is questioned by an apparently suspicious priest.

David lies to the Priest.

He ends up with some food.

But he ends up with more than food.

Verses 8 to 9 tells us that he ends up with the sword of Goliath.

But verse 7 introduces us to an eavesdropper on all of these events.

He is Doeg, a foreigner, an Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds.

In Philistine Territory (21:10-15)

But we hear nothing more.

Instead, David travels west.

Having obtained a sword, he does what we expected him to do before.

He flees.

And he flees westward into Philistine territory.

Apparently he thinks that he will be safer with the enemies of God's people than in the land of God's people.

Again, politics makes strange bedfellows.

It appears as though David is initially received well.

But then the courtiers of the Philistine king remind him of David's reputation.

The quote the very same song that had set Saul against David.

And then, in verse 12, we hear something unusual about the man who had no fears of Goliath.

We hear that David is very afraid.

And in verse 13 he engages in subterfuge.

He becomes a drooling, scratching madman.

But better to be crazy in the court of a Philistine king than to be in the court of a crazed Israelite king.

Refuge in the Cave of Adullam (22:1-5)

However, the façade cannot be maintained for long.

David flees again.

This time he ends up in a cave.

Since Saul's own son is under threat from Saul, it would not be strange if David's family were also under threat.

And so they find shelter with him.

And other dissidents and malcontents gather around him.

And these strange allegiances become an organised band with David at their head.

And then David takes advantage of another strange allegiance.

Moabites were people that Israelites usually had nothing to do with.

But David's grandmother, Ruth, was from Moab.

And so David makes a deal with the king of Moab to look after his parents.

Then, in verse 5 another voice enters.

Not only have discontents gathered around David.

God has also brought his representatives.

And so, where King Saul is bereft of God's word, a prophet brings a word to David.

And so David moves again.

He moves deep into the territory of Judah, to the forest of Hereth.

Extermination at Nob (22:6-23)

The last episode for tonight occurs in chapter 22, verses 6 to 23.

With David's return to Judah, the news filters back to Saul.

We are told that Saul is sitting under a tamarisk tree in Gibeah when he hears the news.

The associations are not good.

In chapter 14 he was sitting under a tree in Gibeah.

He was in the company of the priest of the Lord on that occasion.

The priest of the Lord there was the father of Ahimelech, whom we met in the previous chapter.

Gibeah in chapter 14 was a place where God was present and active.

Nevertheless, it was also a place where Saul took it upon himself to act foolishly and against God.

The reference here is even more ominous.

For in verse 6 we are told that Saul has his spear in hand.

This spear has been used frequently in previous chapters.

He has thrown it against David.

And he has thrown it against his son, Jonathan.

And we wonder what he will do with it this time.

In verse 7 Saul rants in his isolation.

Now he also feels isolated from his own tribespeople.

He accuses them of conspiracy.

And in verse 9 Saul's misery and politics makes strange bedfellows again.

For verse 9 brings Doeg the Edomite back into focus.

He has been promoted.

He is no longer a chief shepherd.

Now he is in charge of Saul's servants.

Look at what he tells Saul about Ahimelech the priest and David.

Ahimelech inquired of the Lord for David.

Ahimelech gave provisions to David.

And Ahimelech gave him the sword of Goliath.

Notice how carefully Doeg speaks.

It is true that Ahimelech gave provisions.

It is true that he gave the sword of Goliath.

But we have no evidence that he inquired of the Lord for him.

But Doeg puts this first.

And given that Saul knows that the Lord is opposed to him, it is the very thing most likely to inflame him.

And it does.

The king sends for Ahimelech.

He charges him with conspiracy.

Ahimelech demonstrates his innocence.

But it is too late.

The injured party is in a position of power.

He becomes prosecutor and judge.

He does not bring the required number of witnesses.

His aggression toward David is transferred to Ahimelech.

But I want you to notice verse 17.

His aggression is not just directed toward David.

The object is also God.

For these priests are the priests of the Lord.

And it is the Lord who has chosen David.

It is the Lord who has opposed Saul.

Saul's downward spiral is complete.

He was once the choice of the Lord.

Then he disobeyed the Lord and his prophet.

Then he distanced himself from the Lord.

Now he is murdering the priests of the Lord.

And so he goes over the top.

In chapter 15, the Lord ordered Saul to carry out holy war on the Amalekites but Saul spared Agag their king.

Now Saul engages in his own holy war on God's priests.

But one escapes.

Abiathar flees to God's anointed king.

And God's anointed king acknowledges his culpability.

And he protects God's representative.

Purposes, Possibilities, and Pain

God's Purpose

Friends, I wonder if we might stand back from this passage for a moment and reflect on what we might learn.

The first thing that I want to note is that God is a God of purpose.

We can see it here in 1 Samuel.

From the beginning of the book he has had in mind an anointed king.

And in these chapters we know that his purposes are tied up with David.

He is where God's purposes are tied up.

Now we readers of the Bible know that God's longterm purposes are tied up with another from David's line.

We know that they are tied up with Jesus, great David's greater son.

He is the cornerstone of God's great purposes in his world.

He is the desire of the nations.

He is the goal of God's history.

Diverse Reactions

The second thing to notice from tonight's passage is that God's purpose in Israel gives rise to diverse reactions.

As God chooses a king and equips him and prepares him, various people react in various ways.

Some of these reactions are toward God.

Some are toward God's purposes.

And some are toward God's people.

We've seen that in today's passage, haven't we?

For example, we know Jonathan from earlier parts of Samuel.

He loves God and has consistently sided with God's purposes.

And so, when he sees that God's purposes are tied up with David, he embraces it.

He sides with David.

He befriends David.

He loves David.

He creates allegiances with David.

And he opposes those who oppose David.

And he does these things to the detriment of himself and his own interests.

On the other end, we have Saul.

Saul is a man whose attention is much more on himself and on how others view him.

He wants to be wanted.

He wants to be adored.

He wants to be at the centre of attention.

But such a person cannot endure having God at the centre.

And so, such a person will inevitably react.

That reaction might become venomous.

It might become irrational.

It might become filled with hatred.

It might even strike out at God himself, just as Saul does by striking out at David, Jonathan, and the priests of Nob.

On the other hand, it might be deliberate and careful and planned.

It might be like Doeg.

Doeg does not appear to think much about God.

He just seems to have his own future in mind more than God's.

He is quite happy to lie, quite happy to kill, quite happy to do what works for him.

Again, let me say that we see such diverse reactions in the Gospels.

We see God at work in Jesus.

And we hear about John the Baptist.

He reacts like Jonathan.

He looks at what he sees and is glad to welcome it.

He sees other people going off after Jesus.

His disciples think that he will be jealous.

But in John 3:29, he likens himself to the friend of the bridegroom.

Listen to what he has to say:

He who has the bride is the bridegroom.

The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.

For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.

He must increase, but I must decrease.

In the gospel stories others are not so self deprecating.

For example, many of the religious leaders are jealous.

And their jealousy results in scheming and plotting and planning the death of God's son.

Or we see another half breed Edomite, Herod the Idumean.

He hears of the birth of God's Messiah through the magi.

He reacts with fury when the magi side with God rather than him.

And he lashes out with overwhelming violence.

He systematically slaughters innocent children under the age of two.

New Allegiances

But the purposes of God not only cause diverse personal reactions.

They also cause new allegiances to be formed.

God's work in David causes Jonathan and David to form a covenant.

God's work in David causes Jonathan to no longer be able to sit in fellowship with his father.

God's work in David, which sets him against Saul, causes a Philistine king to wonder if an allegiance with David might be profitable.

God's work in David, which sets him against Saul, causes discontents with Saul to gather around him in the cave at Adullam.

And God's work in David, which angers Saul, causes Doeg to take advantage of Saul's imbalance.

Again, this can be seen in the New Testament as well.

For in the New Testament God's work in Jesus causes Jewish leaders to cross traditional boundaries.

It causes strict Jews to make alliances with detestable Romans.

It causes Jesus himself to loosen ties with his own physical family.

In the words of Malachi, God's purposes in his anointed one will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.

But, in the words of Jesus, it will also cause children to hate their own mother, brother, and sister.

God's purposes in Jesus will cause new allegiances to be formed.

Pain and Joy

And this brings us to my next point that is illustrated by our passage tonight.

You see, there is some real joy in our story as God works out his purposes in Israel.

There is the joy of friendship between Jonathan and David.

It is a wonder to behold.

It is one of the friendships of the Bible.

But it is also filled with great pain.

For Jonathan also has other relationships and allegiances.

He is a son.

And his siding with God and David forces him to make choices.

He will have to choose to distance himself from his father.

He will have to distance himself from David.

His physical relationship with his father will cause him to die at his father's side.

But his emotional commitment will be with David.

These two men weep together in 1 Samuel 20.

They weep at the pain that God's purposes have on them.

And God's purposes in David will also cause him to send his family off to Moab, a foreign land.

Can you understand what I'm saying?

Siding with God can bring great pain.

We know that in the Gospels.

We see it in the words of Simeon to Mary.

Speaking of Jesus in Luke 2:34 he says:

This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of man will be revealed.

And then Simeon adds the crushing last statement:

And a sword will pierce your own soul too!

As God carries out his purposes in Jesus, Mary and the friends of Jesus lose their own friends.

They lose family ties as they follow him in the way.

And then eventually they lose Jesus himself on the cross.

Jesus does promise them that they will gain much more eventually.

However, following Jesus for them is not without much personal pain.

God's Purpose and Us

Friends, I want to say tonight that what we see with David and with Jesus is a pattern for us as we line up with God's purposes.

God still pushes on in this world with his purposes.

And his pushing on in this world involves us.

If we are his disciples then we are caught up in the pursuit of his purposes.

And his choices and will with us will cause diverse reactions.

It will create some wonderful friendships.

But it will also forge some strange allegiances.

We will find ourselves with strange bedfellows.

And what is more, we will find ourselves opposed and misunderstood.

Sometimes that opposition will be irrational and demonic.

Sometimes it will be well thought out by intelligent and forceful people.

And sometimes God's purposes in and through us will cause great pain.

Sometimes it will divide our families.

Sometimes it will cost us our friends.

People will not understand us.

But I want to tell you that there is no better place to be than to be caught up in the purposes of God.

It is to be on the side of eternity.

It will bring great joy in the presence of God.

| <u>Verses</u> | | <u>Location</u> | <u>People and Action</u> |
|---------------|----|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 20:1-11a | A | At the court | David with Jonathan: Alarm |
| 20:11b-24 | B | In the field | Jonathan speaks to David |
| 20:24b-34 | A' | At the court | Jonathan with Saul at table |
| 20:35-42 | B' | In the field | Jonathan with David: Parting |