

1 Samuel 22:6-26:25

'Power, Abuse, and Innocence'

The Abuse of Power

I was reading somewhere the other day that the abuse of power or authority may be THE prime source and true essence of moral evil.

This writer went on to say that evil IS the abuse of power.

Their argument was that moral evil begins to exist when someone refuses to accept responsibility for the welfare of others, especially those under their direct care.

Now even if you think that this might be an overstatement or over simplification, it cannot be denied that abuse of power is a significant evil.

And tonight I want us to explore this issue using 1 Samuel.

But before we get underway, we'd better get our terms straight.

Abuse of power is the illegitimate use of power.

It is not the possession of power itself that is the problem.

Rather, it is the illegitimate use of it.

So, imagine a person with power.

That power might exist because of superior mental ability, or social position, or wealth, or physical strength.

It might exist because a person possesses knowledge or technology or weapons.

It might exist because of circumstances.

Or it might exist because of a position of trust that has been willingly given by others.

Abuse of power happens when someone who has this power uses it to exploit or harm others.

Or it might even happen through inactivity.

In this case, someone might allow exploitation or harm to occur to others.

Abuse of power exists in nearly every area of life.

It exists in international dialogue.

It exists in politics.

It exists in families.

And it exists in the church.

Wherever people have power there is the risk of its abuse.

An overview of the passage

Saul and the priests of Nob (22:6-23)

We can see an example of it in the very first passage that we look at tonight.

In 1 Samuel 22:6-23 we meet Saul the king.

He is in a position of power.

He is under threat from God.

And he is under threat from David.

The priests of Nob are representatives of God.

And they have innocently helped David.

Saul is offended.

And so he abuses his power and orders a whole village to be slaughtered.

David saves Keilah and escapes (23:1-13)

But let's move on through our passages.

I'll briefly give you an overview of what happens.

After I've done this, I'll draw some common threads together.

Then I'll return to the theme of power and its abuse.

But before we do this, I need to apologise to those of you from the 7:00pm congregation.

You see, we are in the middle of a series and therefore you'll be a bit in the dark.

However, I'm sure you'll catch on.

So, let's get on with our overview.

In 1 Samuel 23:1-13 we encounter the common enemy of both Saul and David.

The Philistines are using their superior military power to abuse the village of Keilah.

They are marauding and looting.

And so David prays.

Saul rarely, if ever, demonstrates any intimate or personal relationship with God.

But David consults God without any intermediaries.

God answers.

David obeys.

And he is victorious.

He is then joined by the ephod carrying refugee from the slaughter of the priests of Nob.

Saul is told.

And without consulting God, Saul does some theological reflection.

Like a number of people in our passage tonight, he takes God's name on his lips and presumes to declare God's will on God's behalf.

It is a theologically risky venture.

And Saul comes a cropper.

For David consults with God himself.

And God gives advice to David.

And David escapes Keilah and Saul.

Saul pursues David; Jonathan visits (23:14-18)

Verse 15 notes that God is clearly on David's side.

For although Saul sought him, the Lord did not give David into his hand.

In 1 Samuel 23:16 to 18, Jonathan visits David.

The Lord uses this son of Saul to strengthen the hand of David and encourage him.

He assures David that he will eventually be king.

And he also assures David that Saul himself knows this.

A narrow escape (23:19-28)

In the rest of chapter 23 we are told of a narrow escape.

The men of Ziph go to Saul and undertake to give away David's movements in their area.

But Saul does not simply rely on their intelligence.

He pursued David himself.

And he nearly has him in his grasp.

But then a messenger brings news of a Philistine incursion.

And Saul deserts the pursuit of David and engages the Philistines.

David takes refuge in the strongholds of Engedi.

Encounter at the cave of Engedi (24:1-23)

And it is here that the next encounter between the two men occurs.

Saul is in pursuit.

He needs to go to the toilet.

And so he uses a convenient cave.

Little does he know that David and his men are hiding in the very same cave.

And just as Saul had engaged in some theological reflection, so do the men of David.

In 24:4, they surmise that the Lord has given Saul into David's hand.

And David is somewhat tempted.

A king's cloak is a symbol of his royal power and authority.

And in the dark of the cave, David reaches out and cuts off a corner of the cloak.

But as soon as he does, he feels heart palpitations.

He is struck in his conscience.

He knows that he has abused his position of power.

He knows that God must control his destiny.

And he knows that Saul is God's king over God's people.

He tells his men that he has acted wrongly.

And he prohibits his men from taking advantage of Saul's situation.

And when Saul exits the cave, David follows him.

He points out his innocence.

Although he has been wronged by Saul, he has not acted wrongly in return.

He has learned from his conscience.

God may act against Saul.

But he, David, will not.

In verses 16ff, Saul weeps.

He is a defeated man.

God is against him.

His son is against him.

And now this man has acted righteously as he himself had failed to act.

It a tragic scene.

And Saul finally admits what had been clear for so long and what he had tried to deny and prohibit.

David will surely be king.

And he calls upon David to continue to act mercifully as he did in the cave.

He asks David to not wipe out his family when the day comes.

The death of Samuel (25:1a)

And so we reach 1 Samuel 25.

Now that Saul has acknowledged God's will, the kingmaker, Samuel can die.

And so verse 1 announces his death and burial.

It also announces that David continues moving around.

Nabal, David, Abigail, and Yahweh (25:1b-44)

And as he moves around, he encounters a man of Maon.

The man has a number of characteristics.

First, we are told in verse 2 that he is a man of considerable wealth.

Second, we are told that his name is Nabal.

The name 'Nabal' means 'fool'.

Now perhaps the name is actually a nickname.

Because the chapter makes clear that this man's name matches his character.

For as his wife says in verse 25, 'as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name and folly is with him.'

Anyway, it appears as though David has been running a bit of a protection racket.

He and his men protect the sheep and their shepherds from harm.

In return, they expect that they will get some benefit from the landowner.

And in verses 5 and following, David sends his men to extract their reward.

But Nabal will have nothing of it.

He is not going to cave in to someone he labels as a renegade slave.

The men return to David.

And David is angry.

He is militarily powerful.

And he is going to abuse his position of military power.

He is going to do what Saul had done with the priests of Nob.

Meanwhile, back at Nabal's house we meet Nabal's wife, Abigail.

She hears what has happened and what David proposes to do.

And so she gathers together a feast of bread, wine, slaughtered sheep and the rest.

It is a substantial feast.

She does not tell Nabal what she is doing.

And she goes out to meet David.

She does obeisance.

She begs his forgiveness.

In a long and detailed speech she acknowledges that he has God's favour and blessing.

And she urges him to not taint his good record with an act that he will regret.

Abigail succeeds.

David acknowledges that God has used her to save him from a dreadful mistake.

Without her, he would have blood on his hands.

He accepts the gifts and assures her of her favour.

And so Abigail returns home.

She finds her husband feasting.

And the next day she tells him what had happened.

He appears to have some sort of heart attack or stroke.

And ten days later God acts.

Nabal had refused shelter to God's anointed.

In so doing he had opposed God's anointed.

And those who opposed God's purposes through his anointed will encounter God's wrath.

Verse 39 tells us that the Lord struck Nabal, and he died.

David rejoices that he has been kept from sin.

He sends and woos Abigail.

And Abigail becomes his wife.

Encounter in the wilderness of Ziph (26:1-25)

Our last passage is chapter 26.

This passage has some similarities with chapter 24.

The men of Ziph bring the intelligence that they promised Saul.

He brings three thousand soldiers to the wilderness of Ziph.

David hears.

He finds where Saul is.

They are sleeping.

Verse 12 tells us that God had caused a deep sleep to fall upon them.

David takes Abishai with him.

Together they sneak into Saul's camp.

Abishai does some more theological reflection.

He assumes that God has given Saul into David's hand.

And as Saul had sought to pin David to the wall with his spear, so Abishai proposes to pin Saul to the ground with the very same weapon.

But David knows God's will.

He knows that Saul is God's anointed king.

He has learnt from the heart palpitations in the cave.

And he has learnt from Abigail that he should not have bloodguilt on his hands when he becomes king.

And he has learnt from Nabal that if someone opposes God's purposes, it is God's place to strike them down.

So they simply take the spear and the water-jar.

They retreat out of the camp.

And then they confront Saul's commander with his ineptitude in guarding Saul.

Saul hears the commotion.

He calls out to David.

They have another discussion.

He urges Saul to not be led astray by bad advice in his reaction toward David.

In stark contrast to David's innocence, Saul acknowledges his sin in verse 21.

He identifies himself with Nabal by calling himself a fool.

And he acknowledges that David will inevitably succeed.

Some common threads

Innocence

So, there is the story.

Let's see if we can draw together some of the common threads.

The first thread has to do with David's innocence.

It appears as though the writer is going out of his way to make clear that David's rise to kingship is not due to the machinations or manipulation of David.

David is innocent of wrong.

If he receives the crown it will not be because he has wrongfully stolen it.

He is innocent of wrong.

Intimacy

The second thread in this story has to do with David's intimacy with God.

The portrayal of Saul in 1 Samuel is of a man that does not seem to have much going in terms of relationship with God.

God seems to be spoken about in the third person.

He talks to Samuel about 'your God' rather than 'my God'.

He relies on third parties interacting with God on his behalf.

And when he himself tries to interact with God it is clumsy and often wrongheaded.

The portrait of David is very different.

David can consult God without priests and ephods.

David feels pangs of conscience and heart palpitations when he does something against God's will.

David can work out what is right and wrong in theological terms.

David can thank God when God protects him from bloodguilt.

David knows God.

He has an intimacy with God.

Threat and temptation

The third thread has to do with threat and temptation.

You see, although he is close to God, David is still a human being.

His relationship with God is under continual threat and temptation.

He has advisers who engage in convincing theological reflection that makes sense.

But it is not from God.

And it is therefore a threat to his being the sort of king that God wants.

He is also a man who buckles under temptation.

We see that with Nabal.

He becomes angry.

He takes up the sword.

And he marches out, ready to abuse the power that is his.

David may be a man after God's own heart.

He may be innocent of guilt in this situation.

But he is also so very human.

Protection

And because he is human, there is only one way that David will receive the throne.

He will only receive the throne because of God's protection.

This is what all the references are about throughout the text.

God protects him from Saul.

God sends Abigail to stop him from bloodguilt.

God sends a great sleep upon Saul's army.

David is a man at risk.

He could so easily become a Saul.

But he doesn't.

David is God's anointed.

But David will not receive the crown because of his innocence.

He will only be innocent, only receive the crown, because of God's action, because of God's providential care.

A theological footnote

Before we move on to look at the implications for us, I want to make a small theological footnote to this story.

The books of Samuel are about David and the rise of kingship.

At times they give us a picture of a David who is a model king.

But they also tell us that David was a flawed human being.

Having shown David's innocence in 1 Samuel, the writer of 2 Samuel goes on to tell us that David is far from innocent.

He will go on to abuse power by taking another man's wife.

He will then further abuse power by having his army kill the man.

And these will be just two acts among many where David will show his humanity.

By telling us these things, the writer of the books of Samuel will urge us to look for another.

If God is to have an eternal king, he will have to be made of similar but different stock to David.

He will have to succeed where David failed.

In the language of the New Testament, he will have to be without sin.

And there is only one human who has been without sin—Jesus, the true anointed; Jesus, the Christ.

For us...

Males and power

But let's now wrap things up and see what more we can learn from this passage.

The first thing I want you to notice is the actions of the males in this passage.

You see, in ancient Israelite society, men were the people who had power and authority.

And this makes them the people who are most likely to abuse power.

We can see them rising to this temptation continually throughout this passage.

We see it in Saul's slaughter of the priests of Nob.

We see it in the men of Ziph courting Saul's favour.

We see it in the men of David seeking to kill first and worry about God's concerns later.

We see it in David's girding on his sword and marching out in anger.

Which women often recognise

Contrast this with some of the women of the books of Samuel.

You see, in ancient Israelite society women were often in the position of weakness in terms of authority and power.

This means that they were often able to recognise that men are prone to misuse power.

And they are often able to recognise that there are better ways to do things.

There are more godly ways to do things.

We can see this with Abigail.

She sees her husband.

She sees David.

She sees men with their power fetishes.

And she proposes an alternative.

David ought not to sin like Saul.

He ought not to get into the power thing.

Rather, he should be dependently reliant upon God.

He should concentrate on being godly, not on exerting power.

This will allow God to act.

Abigail sees things the way Hannah had seen things.

Hannah was helpless to invent her own future.

She went to God dependently.

She trusted in him.

And he exalted her at the appropriate time.

And she understood reality.

Listen to her as she celebrates it in 1 Samuel 2:

⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

⁹“*He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.*”

¹⁰*The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven.*

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

Did you hear that last line?

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

This is what we have seen tonight.

This is the king God wants.

This is the anointed God wants.

This is the Messiah God wants.

This is the Christ God wants.

One who does not prevail by might or power but one who depends upon God for strength.

And which Jesus rejects

And so when Jesus comes into the world, he comes as these women had foreseen.

He does not come with a male fetish for power.

He rejects these things.

Instead, he comes meekly, dependently, trustingly.

He comes as a true man and a true king.

He is consistently what David was occasionally.

His means to power is service.

His weapon is the weakness and shame of a cross.

He is obedient and humble.

The true man, true king—Jesus.

Following Jesus

Friends, this is what we are to be like in all areas of life.

We are to put aside weapons of power and might.

If we are parents, we are to be like Jesus.

We are not to exasperate our children with abuse of power.

If we are employers, we are to be like Jesus.

We are not to bully those under our authority or mistreat them.

If we are pastors or church leaders, we are to be like Jesus.

We must not manipulate.

We must not abuse the trust that has been given to us.

We are to be examples of godliness and innocence and humility.

Not dominators, but slaves.

Friends, do not be deceived.

The way of Jesus is the way of humility.

It is the way of the cross.

It does not use the weapons of this world.

It has no fetish with power.