

“Madness”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 78)

1 Samuel 16.14-23 and chapters 18-31

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Today we are approaching a very difficult portion of scripture: the story of the madness of King Saul. The story unfolds over *half* of the book of 1 Samuel, beginning in chapter 16 and continuing all the way to the book’s end. Saul’s madness turns his reign into a *royal disaster*, with negative consequences spilling out into the lives of his children, his court, and the nation he had pledged to serve. It is a tragic story, similar in many ways to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; it is also one of the Bible’s most compelling stories. If you have never read these chapters, please do. They are *rich* in drama and emotion. The story resonates with us deeply. Nowadays Saul’s madness would be described as a mental illness, which some of us are a bit too familiar with. Right now, 350 million people are suffering from depression, 60 million have bipolar, 47.5 million have dementia, and 21 million have schizophrenia, just to name a few. Some of you have had to deal with mental illness in your own family. Psychiatrists who have looked at Saul’s story speculate that he suffered from mania, or depression, or bipolar disorder, or some form of psychotic disorder. Today there are many forms of assistance that were not available three thousand years ago – psychologists, psychiatrists, medications, support groups (both for the one afflicted and for their loved ones), and there is no shame in seeking aid for yourself or for someone you love if you believe you may be dealing with a mental health issue. In fact, you would be foolish *not* to seek help.

The Bible does not say that Saul suffered from mental illness. What it says is that he was tormented by an “evil spirit” – an “evil spirit *from the LORD*.” That’s a loaded phrase, and we need to unpack it. But first, let me quickly summarize what happened when madness consumed King Saul.

Saul’s servants could tell that something was wrong with their king. They looked for a musician who might soothe him. They select young David; David plays his lyre for Saul; the music therapy helps. Yet when David starts having great military victories – like his triumph over Goliath – Saul gets jealous. *Insanely* jealous. The people shout, “Saul has killed thousands, but David tens of thousands.” Several times, in a fit of jealous rage, Saul tries to impale David with a spear. Then Saul plots to have David killed. Saul’s daughter Michal – David’s wife – helps David escape from her mad father. Saul’s son Jonathan – David’s best friend – relays messages to David about Saul’s mood and David’s safety. David takes refuge among a group of priests; when Saul finds out, he kills 85 of the priests, and their families. David tries to keep fighting Israel’s *real* enemies, the Philistines, but all the while he’s on the run from

Saul, who keeps sending troops to find him and kill him. Twice David has an opportunity to kill Saul and end the madness; twice David refuses to kill Israel's king; twice Saul repents of his sin. Yet the madness consumes Saul again, and David is forced to go into hiding. Finally, when the Philistines invade Israel, three of Saul's sons – including Jonathan – are killed in battle, Saul is wounded, and commits suicide.

Madness. That's what it is. Madness that turns jealousy into an obsession; madness that drives Saul to attempt murder (multiple times); madness that turns Saul's daughter and son against him; madness that leads to death and devastation and suicide. Madness. Or, rather ... "an evil spirit *from the LORD*." Why would *God* send an *evil spirit* into Saul? Why would *God*, in a sense, *cause* all this carnage?

Some questions do not have easy answers ... but let me make a couple observations.

First: Evil spirits show up with some regularity in the Bible. They only appear a couple times in the Old Testament – here in this story, where Saul's evil spirit is mentioned six times (16.14; 16.15; 16.16; 16.23; 18.10; and 19.9), and once in the book of Judges, when God sends an evil spirit *between* a wayward king and the his people. (Judges 9.23) But in the New Testament they are frequently mentioned. In the gospels Jesus casts evil spirits and demons out of people, person after person; he does that a *lot*. When he sends his disciples out to do ministry in his name, they are surprised to discover that they too have the ability to cast out evil spirits and demons (Luke 10.17-20). Later, after Christ's ascension, the apostles continue to cast out evil spirits in Jesus' name (Acts 5.16; 8.7). Evil spirits show up relatively frequently in the Bible, and *most* of the time, God was in the business of *casting them out of people*. There's only one instance in the whole Bible when we're told that God sent an evil spirit *into* somebody: here in the story of King Saul. Saul was very much the *exception* to the rule.

That leads to my second observation. Some people say that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New Testament. Nineteen centuries ago a man named Marcion taught that what Jesus said and did in the New Testament is inconsistent with what God said and did in the Old Testament, that the God of the Old Testament was merely a tribal deity of the Jews and not the universal God of love and compassion that we see in Jesus, and that when Jesus referred to God, he was not referring to the "Old Testament" God but rather to a "higher" God, the Heavenly Father. Versions of these notions are *very* common today. You need to know that the early church came down hard on Marcion's teachings. *Very* hard. They considered him a false teacher. They rejected his teachings as heretical. They said, "That is *not* Christianity." The God of the Old Testament *is* the same as the God of the New. If you believe anything other than that, you are rejecting a central teaching of Christianity. The God who sent Jesus to heal people and cast out evil spirits and teach about the kingdom of God and save us from our sins and win for us eternal life is the *same* God who sent an evil spirit into Saul. That's just *fact*. There is *no way to get around* that truth – and still remain within the bounds of Christianity.

Why would God do that to Saul, when it seems so inconsistent with what Jesus does in the New Testament? I think the answer has to do with Saul's spiritual failures, which we talked about a few weeks ago. As I said then, he was disobedient, rebellious, and arrogant. He made rash vows that God hadn't told him to make. He listened to the Word of the Lord, but *only* the parts he wanted to hear. He didn't really believe that God's Word *mattered*. He rejected *God*. So God rejected *him* ... and it seems

that one of the outcomes of that rejection was that God allowed this evil spirit to come into Saul. Evil spirits try to sneak their way into *all* our lives; Paul tells us in Ephesians that “we aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens.” (Ephesians 6.12) It would seem that God *allowed* or even *invited* an evil spirit to enter Saul’s life, in a similar manner to how God allowed Satan to afflict Job (Job 1). It is hard to wrap our minds around *why* God would do this. In the final chapters of the book of Job, God basically says: “Look, I’m God, and you’re not. You’re not going to get answers to all your questions.” In Isaiah God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55.8). And Paul, after several very complicated chapters in his epistle to the Romans, exclaims: “God’s riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep! They are as mysterious as his judgments, and they are as hard to track as his paths!” (Romans 11.33) *Sometimes we don’t understand why God does the things he does.* Sometimes, maybe we’re not *meant* to understand. This might be one of those times. We are left with the uncomfortable truth that God sent Jesus, and his disciples and apostles after him, to *cast evil spirits out of people*, yet there was this *one* time when God did the *opposite*. Instead of casting the evil spirit *out* of somebody, he put it *in*.

What does this mean for us today, in a world where mental illnesses (like whatever Saul had) are common? How are we to approach this from a *Christian* perspective? I believe that mental illness is one of the ways those “forces of cosmic darkness” and “spiritual powers of evil in the heavens” try to mar God’s beautiful creation. I do *not* believe that mental illness is, in the vast majority of cases, *caused by God*. God gets blamed for a lot of things. But if we take the New Testament seriously, then we need to accept the truth that God is not the *only* supernatural force operating in the cosmos. Just because something goes wrong in somebody’s life, just because somebody you love develops a mental illness, does *not* mean it’s God’s fault. Based on what our scriptures teach us, I think it is *wrong* to immediately jump to the conclusion that “God did this.” Yes, there is the example of Saul, whose madness was caused by the evil spirit that came from God, but that is *only one person* out of *many* in the scriptures who were afflicted with evil spirits, and in *every other case*, it was *not* from God. Saul is the *exception* to the rule, not the norm. Don’t just assume that the mental illness that’s impacting you or someone you love is *God’s* doing. Consider the possibility that it’s the *Enemy’s* doing. Consider the possibility that this is evil’s way of marring part of God’s beautiful creation. Consider the truth that the thief has come to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10.10). Consider the truth that Christ has come to set us *free*.

When mental illness strikes, by all means, seek medical treatment, *but don’t just stop there*. Consider what might be going on in the *spiritual* realm. Consider the possibility that praying in the strong name of Jesus *just might* make a difference. If Jesus could cast out evil spirits two thousand years ago, if disciples ministering in his name could cast out evil spirits even after Jesus no longer walked this earth, *what makes you think that prayers uttered in Christ’s name might not have that same effect today?* I was just at a fabulous conference last weekend that addressed the limitations of our medical and therapeutic models and that demonstrated the power of *healing prayer*. There are things that Jesus can do that modern medicine can’t. *Period*. I *believe* it. I’ve *seen it happen*. There is *power* in his name. *Claim* it. *Use* it. *Pray!* Pray against that evil spirit. Pray that it would be *bound* and *banished*. Pray for *life* and *restoration*. Pray that Jesus Christ would *set that person free*. And pray ... like you *mean* it.

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