



## "Death by Bitterness"

- 1 Samuel 26

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In 362AD, there died a Roman Emperor by the name of Julian. Julian had a brief albeit fairly well-known rule in which he apparently

tried his best to reverse the effects of the previous ruler, Emperor Constantine, who had moved Rome into a perpetual forward motion toward Christianity. Julian's desire was to see Rome returned to the previous 'glory days' of pagan Gods and classic Roman values.

It was generally understood that Julian had grown up with Christian parents and in a Christian household, and thus he knew enough about the dynamics of Christianity to know the weaknesses of its professors and effectively do harm through such. What Julian did...the damage he committed against the faith, was done with "insider knowledge." They were "insider attacks." So his efforts to undermine the growth and expansion of the Christian church was done through knowing just how and where to hurt its followers.

He knew believers were famous for their hypocrisy and disunity, so he exploited such to ridicule and malign a belief system that preached against both. Earlier emperors had thrown Christians to the lions, yet Julian once remarked that "*no wild beasts are as dangerous to man as Christians are to each other.*" In this belief, he found ways in which to simply arrange situations where Christians could hurt each other and their own cause, through fostering bitterness, division, and hypocrisy...something that was, *and is*, quite easy to perpetuate in Christendom. When Christians are evil to other Christians, well they are essentially both defeated already.

The account before us in 1 Samuel is a familiar one. Not because *we* have covered it before, but because *Saul and David* had covered it before. Let us understand that while the events before us are moving along at a fairly regular and easy pace, the actual story transpired over years! Time for mistakes to occur, plenty of time for God's grace to play out, and thus plenty of time for there to be real repentance and a real change of life and relationship. Saul had already attempted to kill David on more than one occasion, and he had already spoken *words* of regret and repentance concerning all of his actions toward David. But consistently after a period of time, Saul would renege on his words and exposed his real heart and spirit toward David. Inevitably, Saul would again rise with gritted teeth and come after David. Hatred, bitterness and animosity are not cold virus' that we catch, and then get over in time. No, they are cancers, which while we can have periods of remission, nearly without fail, it will arise again eventually to consume us. One does not put a little balm on cancer. Cancer must be 'cut out.' It must be treated with aggressive action!

Saul *felt* bad. But little did it matter. Feeling bad didn't change anything, and it still doesn't. He still was in bondage to his emotions, weaknesses and insecurities. What 'feeling bad' does for us is that it generally fosters an environment where anger and hatred is then fed, because anger and hatred trumps all emotions...they cover all other feelings, especially the ones that are uncomfortable to us and make us feel guilty and broken. So if I can whip up my anger and hatred, I don't have to internalize those uncomfortable feelings, I can instead turn them back on those around me. Because at that point, the only person that matters in the whole scheme of things, is *me*.

That's where Saul was in Chapter 26.

Now David was on a journey himself, one of self-realization and personal understanding. He was being tried and tested in some serious ways, and yet because we know the totality of the story, we know that God had not departed from him nor had He lifted his hand of calling and commitment from Him. No, David was going through some things that would ultimately make him stronger and more prepared to lead, while Saul on the other hand would pass through the self choices that would result in obscurity...the road which would lead him further and further away from a life of consequence...a life that mattered to anyone else, least of all to a God who was set upon changing the world.

Having already seemingly "repented" of his actions, it is both sad and disheartening to see Saul once again on the hunt for David. He seemingly 'beat down' his sin for a time, but it came back with a vengeance and jealousy and spite would overcome him. Those around him would be profoundly affected. He would put their well-being in jeopardy, and would alienate the members of his own family...his own children, but it didn't matter at this point; Saul was consumed and willing to burn down the village to have his satisfaction. For the blindness of bitterness is profound and all consuming. This was not the Saul who was chosen to be King...the man who had stood head and shoulders taller than all the people. No, this was now a 'little man' who had become consumed by his own emotions and insecurities, and would only garner a historical footnote because of the story of his own demise.

Once again, Saul strikes out to find David and rid himself of this bane in his life. And once again he takes 3000 men to help him do it. Because that is how we do this: *we don't go at it one to one, we bring as many others to the party as we can*. Julian, you see, *did* understand the weak and fleshly tendencies of God's chosen. How we *say* one thing, but we ultimately *do* another. We teach others how to behave *but we ourselves are 'victims'...slaves to our worldly emotions and not under the control of the God we claim is ours*. Our weakness's not only betray us but they ultimately betray the one we call "Lord."

In verse 6, when David asked Ahimelech and Abishai "who will go with me" effectively "*into the breach,*" Abishai stepped up and Ahimelech did not. One might think that such a question was cruel and unnecessary, as one stepped forward and one stepped back. One might see David as cruel for having put these two men into such a position as this. But it was and is the same position that Christ puts each of US in even today! This is not a girl scout meeting. This is war! And for each of us...perhaps on the human level, and for sure on the spiritual level, we each will be asked "*will you go with me?*" God is asking that of each of us even today. These are the profound moments of life...the epic crossroads of life! In Isaiah 6 we read of one such moment, when Isaiah chose to step up when everyone else would step back. Verses 8 and 9 read " *... I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And He said, "Go, and tell this people..."*

If we look into the pages of scripture from here...*the first mention of Abishai*, we find that this man became a warrior. Never a king...never the boss, but a second in command that was a warrior to be reckoned with. And it began here...with just a question: "*will you go with me?*" Abishai would go on from that crossroads...that 'step forward'...that question, and would be part of changing the world. His name would be mentioned throughout this book, the next, and 1 Chronicles, where we read in 18:12 "Moreover Abishai the son of Zeruah killed eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt." Wow. This guy became a warrior. Ahimelech the Hittite however is never mentioned or heard from again...

Saul would add to his baggage this day, but David would not. It was not for a lack of reason, that is for sure. Saul gave him plenty of reasons to justify his counter-action, but he resisted his flesh and stood down. Several times throughout this story, David could have 'disqualified' himself by his actions, just as we can by ours! He knew that to 'raise his hand against God's anointed' would be a bad deal for them both. Even if Saul was messing up, it was not David's to take him out. God *put* him there, and it was hardly an issue for God to *take him out*. David knew not to get into between God and His chosen. Certainly many of tried it. Few if any have survived it.

David was smarter than that! Sadly, such restraint is no longer the practice of those who call themselves Christians...again, just as Emperor Julian knew even then. Scripture tells us that three groups of men were 'anointed:' *prophets, priests, and kings*. And yet the three groups that individuals in churches regard as "open season" are those who *teach the word of God*, those who *preach the Word of God*, and those who have been *placed in authority by God*. We just don't trust God to take care of things Himself. In fact, truth be told, *we don't really want him to. We want to be the judge, jury and executioner ourselves!* But not David! Verse 10 clearly gives us his thinking, and that is that if Saul was guilty...*if God wanted Saul dead*, then God would take him out. Just like He did with Nabal in the previous chapter!

Oh, but how easy it is to compromise! What a simply thing it is to stand down like Ahimelech when we should step up. To lash out, when we are to step back like David did. To keep hating when we need to repent like Saul refused to do. To become bitter instead of surrendering. To excuse ourselves. To write ourselves a 'hall pass' and say we will do it right 'next time.' But had any of these men chose the 'other road', we would know this story in a completely different light.

David wanted to be very sure of the reason behind his action...that such was righteous and true. He also wanted to be sure about the actions of others toward him! Were THEY righteous? He says in verse 19: *If the LORD has stirred you up against me, then let him accept my offering. But if this is simply a human scheme, then may those involved be cursed by the LORD*. How many of us are guilty of "stirring up others" against someone? Just a "human scheme" to hurt another because perhaps we believe they have hurt us. And as Julian the emperor would say "let the games begin!"

Once again may we point out that this is not the first time around the mountain for Saul. How patient God is with us! Already David could have assassinated Saul, but he held back his hand. Saul was humbled and broken, but only for a time. Because the "root" of that bitterness was still there even if the plant had been removed. When we have held back...when we have failed to surrender the whole matter, we can count on visiting that situation again...and again...and again. The 'groundhogs day' of sin. Hebrews 12:14-15 reminds us that we are to "*Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many...*"

One can only wonder how many have been 'disqualified' from being used by God because they held onto some self-serving bitterness that they felt they could not let go of. And yet, it was Joseph in Genesis that had as good of reason to be bitter as anyone who has lived! His brothers beat him, threw him in a hole, and then sold him into slavery. And you thought *your* family was dysfunctional! Then he lived the next *years* of his life as a slave! And yet...because of his faithfulness, life did not end that way. In fact, God greatly used him and he came to know great victory and joy in his life. But everyday he had to get out of bed and refuse to let bitterness take hold. He had to *know* that God had his back. Because when we take matters into our own hands and go after the one who hurt us or seek to gain power over a situation, we are not dis'ing that other person, we are dis'ing *GOD*. Our sin therefore is double, as we sin against the other individual, but moreover we sin directly against the sovereign God !

When that day came, Joseph could of had all his brothers slowly and painfully executed. But he did not. He forgave, as God forgave. He remarked " *You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.*" (Ge 50:20)

*God intended it for good? Really? But it was hard! It was painful, and embarrassing, and costly...and, ...and, ...did I mention hard?* Let us get over the idea that all that feels good and is comfortable and is personally expedient and immediately gratifying is of God and the opposite is of the devil. Because if we cannot, we are doomed to fail like Saul, and never know the righteous peace of David, and forever be distracted, fearful and feeling sorry for ourselves so that we will never know the fullness of life that was Abishai. It is all ours to lose. For God desires to show us what " *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined...*" He wants to show you " *what God has prepared for those who love him.*" (1 Cor 2:9) But He never said that the journey was easy, painless, or without testing...