

# GREAT ESCAPES

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:  
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



Catalog No. 20150927  
Samuel 19:1-24  
8th Message  
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September 27, 2015

*1 Samuel 19:1-24*

Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister of Great Britain on the eve of World War II, thought he could reason with Hitler. He met privately with Hitler and called him a “gentleman.” In the name of peace, Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938, which effectively allowed Germany to annex the Czech Sudetenland. Shortly thereafter, Hitler occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and shortly after that he invaded Poland, and World War II began. Chamberlain, by the way, was reared by Universalists who believed that humanity was essentially good.<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain’s successor, Winston Churchill, was not so naïve.

Adolf Hitler, obviously, is an extreme example, but we all encounter unreasonable, controlling people. Some of us were reared by them, some of us work for them, and some of us live with them. You might be one yourself! Saul was an unreasonable, controlling person. How did David deal with him?

## Try reason

**1 Samuel 19:1-7:**

**And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, Saul’s son, delighted much in David. <sup>2</sup>And Jonathan told David, “Saul my father seeks to kill you. Therefore be on your guard in the morning. Stay in a secret place and hide yourself. <sup>3</sup>And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you. And if I learn anything I will tell you.” <sup>4</sup>And Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, “Let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have brought good to you. <sup>5</sup>For he took his life in his hand and he struck down the Philistine, and the Lord worked a great salvation for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced. Why then will you**

**sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?” <sup>6</sup>And Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan. Saul swore, “As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death.” <sup>7</sup>And Jonathan called David, and Jonathan reported to him all these things. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.**

Saul, who earlier hid his disdain for David, is now desperate enough to put an end to his rival that he comes out in the open. Normally, a son would be loyal to his father, not his father’s rival, especially if his father is the king. Any hint of disloyalty could endanger not only his position as next in line but also his life. However, Jonathan, who was drawn to David after he defeated Goliath, delights in David and recognizes the baselessness of his father’s cause. Therefore, Jonathan stands up to his father for David, come what may.

Saul commanded his servants to kill David, but Jonathan reminds his father that David is also his servant. Jonathan asserts that David has done Saul no wrong. On the contrary, Jonathan adds, David, at great risk to himself, has blessed Saul by killing Goliath, the Philistine who was threatening Israel, Saul’s kingdom. Back then, Jonathan reminds his father, he was quite happy with David: “You saw it and rejoiced.” Why, Jonathan asks his father, does he want to kill David “without cause”?

Does Saul have a cause, a reason for doing away with David? Of course he does; he just hasn’t disclosed it, because it’s not a righteous cause. He has ordered the death of David because he’s envious and jealous of David, who has become quite popular, but to disclose his rationale would expose him to public scorn.

When Saul saw David defeat Goliath, he rejoiced. Now he hears Jonathan, and he relents. Invoking the name of the Lord, Saul vows to spare David’s life. But vowing not to kill someone, in the manner of Saul, is far cry from pledging your life to someone, in the manner of Jonathan.

Our first inclination when we encounter someone who is behaving *unreasonably* is to (what else?) *reason* with such a one. It’s worth a shot. You don’t just write

someone off. You do what Jonathan did: you try reason—prayerfully, of course, for only the power of the LORD, not the power of your argument, will win the day. Just like Jonathan, make your case.

David returns to the court. All is as it was. Or is it?

## The spear versus the lyre

### 1 Samuel 19:8-10:

**And there was war again. And David went out and fought with the Philistines and struck them with a great blow, so that they fled before him. <sup>9</sup>Then a harmful spirit from the Lord came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing the lyre. <sup>10</sup>And Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. And David fled and escaped that night.**

When David defeated Goliath, Saul rejoiced. However, David's subsequent victories provoked envy and jealousy in Saul. Once again, David is victorious in battle. What will it be? Will Saul rejoice, having been reminded by Jonathan of his first posture toward David? Or will he lapse into envy and jealousy?

We don't have to wait long for an answer. A harmful spirit from the Lord, literally an "evil" spirit from the Lord, asserts itself again (1 Samuel 16:14, 18:10). We're left to assume that Saul, envious and jealous of the Lord's anointed king, has marked himself out as the Lord's adversary, and if the Lord can't woo his adversaries, he sometimes frustrates them, even using evil for his own purposes. In reality, then, the Lord is only giving Saul what he has marked himself out as wanting, just as he hardened Pharaoh's already-hardened heart.

Saul listened with his ears to the voice of Jonathan, who appealed for the life of David, but not with his heart. What he heard didn't penetrate his heart. And what he vowed misrepresented his heart. Saul's problem is not so much envy and jealousy but his refusal to confront his envy and jealousy. Refusing to deal with the truth, he has opened the door to evil. He's become an addict. He's addicted to envy and jealousy. He's what both Jesus and Paul call a slave to sin (John 8:34, Romans 6:22).

Once again, while David literally plays the lyre with his "hand," Saul, in a fit of jealous rage, literally tries to kill David with the spear in his "hand" (1 Samuel 18:10-11). What happened to his vow: "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death"? So much for vows. And so much for the Lord, whose name Saul had invoked.

David shall not be put to death? In one sense, Saul was right: David escapes once again. David "struck" the Philistines "with a great blow," but the only thing Saul manages to strike is the wall.

## Some people can't be reasoned with

First, try reasoning with someone who is behaving unreasonably. Just know, though, that some people simply can't be reasoned with, no matter how well you make your case. Jonathan's case was well-reasoned and brilliantly delivered, and though Saul was apparently convinced by it, his repentance was short-lived.

Saul's cause for doing away with David was driven by deeply rooted envy and jealousy, which couldn't be rooted out by one reasonable argument. Some people, like Saul, have opened the door so wide to evil and have become so internally warped by evil that there's no going back—at least for a long time, maybe not ever. They've become addicts and slaves—to envy, jealousy, whatever. They may listen with their ears but not with their hearts. They may make vows with their lips, but they don't believe them in their hearts.

Why? Because they don't want to confront the evil in their hearts. This, by the way, is what separates David from Saul more than anything else: David is willing to confront the evil in his heart, and Saul isn't. David therefore has a fighting chance against evil. Saul has capitulated to evil.

I've talked with several of you who work for some pretty unreasonable people. I worked for one or two in my time (in the news business, not in the church—although churches also have their share of unreasonable leaders).

According to a recent story in *Time* magazine, "The vast majority of research shows that narcissism, rather than modesty, predicts being selected for and surviving in leadership roles . . . Sometimes, the best bosses have to lie and manipulate to save money and jobs. Often, they have to disregard concern for others." The story went on to say that "these truths" are backed by social science and knowledge of contemporary organizations—and they're likelier to help people lead."<sup>2</sup>

I wonder whether the demands of leadership in the Silicon Valley make it almost inevitable that some leaders will lose their decency. In the newly released documentary *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine*, Daniel Kottke, a one-time friend of Jobs and an early employee at Apple, asks, "How much of a [jerk] do you have to be to be successful?" I assume that Pat Gelsinger, the CEO of VMware and a strong believer, who preached at our church earlier this year, would answer that you don't have to be any bit of a jerk. Nevertheless, the Valley

seems to attract and cultivate its share of extraordinarily gifted but emotionally crippled leaders who simply can't be reasoned with.

I have an inordinate confidence in my ability to reason with people and convince them of the truth (or at least what I believe to be the truth). I grew up in the shadow of the Enlightenment, which believes in the triumph of human reason. I instinctively think that most people are open to reason and can be persuaded by reason. My instincts, however, have failed me more times than I can count. Much research in recent decades indicates that humans are not so reasonable after all: they make decisions not so much based on reason but on emotions and motivations that they often don't even understand. There's a lot going on in human hearts that simply isn't open to reason.

How do talk Hitler out of invading Europe? You don't. How do you talk Saul out of pursuing David? You don't.

## Emotional distance

### 1 Samuel 19:11-17:

**Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, told him, "If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." <sup>12</sup>So Michal let David down through the window, and he fled away and escaped. <sup>13</sup>Michal took an image and laid it on the bed and put a pillow of goats' hair at its head and covered it with the clothes. <sup>14</sup>And when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, "He is sick." <sup>15</sup>Then Saul sent the messengers to see David, saying, "Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him." <sup>16</sup>And when the messengers came in, behold, the image was in the bed, with the pillow of goats' hair at its head. <sup>17</sup>Saul said to Michal, "Why have you deceived me thus and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped?" And Michal answered Saul, "He said to me, 'Let me go. Why should I kill you?'"**

Saul's son has sided with David. How about his daughter? Like Jonathan, Michal loved David—in a different way, of course, for she was his wife (1 Samuel 18:1, 20). But Saul was her father, and Saul was the king. Like Jonathan, Michal, at great risk to herself, comes to David's aid. Because of his hatred for David, Saul has lost both his son and his daughter. Michal warns David, and just as he escaped after dodging Saul's spear, he escapes before Saul's messengers arrive.

To buy David time, Michal convinces Saul's messengers, who have been sent to apprehend him, that David is sick. Michal deceives the messengers by using an idol, which is about all an idol is good for: deceiving people. An idol deceives people into thinking that it will be of some benefit to them. Saul says to the messengers, who have apparently reported back to him concerning David's illness, and perhaps fear catching whatever ails David: for crying out loud, bring him to me bed and all! By the time they return, and uncover not David but the idol, David is long gone.

Michal, who deceived her father with the idol, deceives him once again, claiming that she helped David because he threatened her. She feigns loyalty to Saul. But didn't Saul feign loyalty to David by vowing to Jonathan not to kill him? Saul deceived Jonathan with his vow; perhaps he even deceived himself. In this case, justice is served: he who deceived his son is deceived by his daughter.

Michal puts words in David's mouth: "Why should I kill you [Michal]?" She deceives her father, but Saul has heard such words before. Jonathan told him, "Why then will you sin against innocent blood by killing David without cause?" Will Michal's words serve to remind Saul of Jonathan's words, which convinced him to suspend his persecution of David, so that he ceases his maniacal pursuit of David? By now we pretty much know the answer.

What do you do if you come up against a controlling person who can't be reasoned with? You do what David did: you put some distance between you and the that person. At times, this may mean physically removing yourself from the controlling person's presence: moving out, changing groups, leaving the company. There are times, however, when leaving simply isn't possible, practical, or even right, at least for the time being. In any event, most importantly, you need to put some emotional distance between you and the controlling person.

How do you do that? How does David do it?

## Saul versus the Spirit

### 1 Samuel 19:18-24:

**Now David fled and escaped, and he came to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and lived at Naioth. <sup>19</sup>And it was told Saul, "Behold, David is at Naioth in Ramah." <sup>20</sup>Then Saul sent messengers to take David, and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as head over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of**

**Saul, and they also prophesied. <sup>21</sup>When it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they also prophesied. And Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they also prophesied. <sup>22</sup>Then he himself went to Ramah and came to the great well that is in Secu. And he asked, “Where are Samuel and David?” And one said, “Behold, they are at Naioth in Ramah.” <sup>23</sup>And he went there to Naioth in Ramah. And the Spirit of God came upon him also, and as he went he prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah. <sup>24</sup>And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, “Is Saul also among the prophets?”**

David, having been rescued by Jonathan and Michal, now seeks refuge in Samuel, the prophet who anointed him king. Naioth, in Ramah, is probably not a city but a remote camp where Samuel housed and trained prophets. When David fled the court, Saul sent three waves of messengers to David’s house to apprehend him, but in each case they came back empty-handed. Once again, he sends three waves of messengers, and, once again, they fail three more times.

In the first case, they fell victim to Michal’s words of deceit. In this case, they fall victim to the prophets’ words of truth. The Spirit of God seizes them, they break off their pursuit of David, and they join Samuel’s prophets.

Well, if you want a job done right, you’ve got to do it yourself. So Saul heads out to Ramah, comes to a well, and asks about the whereabouts of Samuel and David.

Before he was anointed king, Saul came to where young women were drawing water, evidently a well, and asked concerning the whereabouts of Samuel, hoping that the prophet would help him locate his lost donkeys (1 Samuel 9:11). Back then, Samuel anointed Saul king and Saul met a group of prophets, whereupon the Spirit of God came upon him and he began to prophesy (1 Samuel 10:1-13). Once again, after Saul comes to a source of water in search of Samuel, the Spirit of God comes upon him so that he, like his messengers, prophesies and breaks off his pursuit of David.

In 1 Samuel 10, the Spirit came to empower Saul; in this scene, the Spirit comes to constrain him. The first scene marked the beginning of Saul’s reign; this scene marks the end, even if Saul can’t let go. Saul, seized by the Spirit, strips off his clothes. His royal garb, and his kingship, is being stripped from him. Jonathan, out of love for David, freely stripped himself of his robe and gave it to David, renouncing his right to the throne (1 Samuel 18:4). Saul, on the other hand, is compelled to

strip while hatred for David rules his heart. Saul can’t help but fall down and lay naked on the ground all day and all night, giving David time to escape but also symbolizing the fall of his reign as king. The sight of Saul, who was a head taller than his countrymen, writhing naked on the ground is indeed a pathetic one.

So it was said, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” It was not the first time that such was said. When Saul prophesied after becoming king, this became a proverb in Israel: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Samuel 10:12) Back then, the words were hopeful, full of promise. Now they mark a shameful end.

Jonathan stands up for David. Michal shelters him. Samuel takes him in. Finally, the Spirit constrains Saul. Watch for how God protects you, sending a friend to stand up for you, a spouse to shelter you, a prophet to take you in, the Spirit to constrain an enemy.

## **The word of God and the people of God**

Controlling people want you to listen to them and to do what they say. They learn what works, what to say, and what gestures to use—what buttons to push. They are often master manipulators. They specialize in lies, half-truths, and distortions. How do you put emotional distance between you and a controlling person? Simply put, you need listen to God and what he says. What did David do? He fled to a prophet, who spoke the Word of God, and to a school of prophets, who together spoke the word of God and thereby reinforced it. Where do we go? We go to the Word of God, spoken by the prophets and now preserved for us in the Scriptures, and to the people of God, who are immersing themselves in the Word and thereby reinforcing it.

We gather on Sunday mornings to hear the Word of God preached. One of our commitments at this church is to preach sermons from the Word of God with clarity and relevance so that God may be heard and that we may believe him, not lies, half-truths, and distortions—not least the lies, half-truths, and distortions of controlling people. We also gather in smaller groups—schools of prophets, if you will—who reinforce the Word of God, “speaking the truth in love” and “encouraging one another” (convert) (Ephesians 4:15, Hebrews 10:25).

If we are to distance ourselves emotionally from controlling people—indeed, if we are to confront the evil impulses of our own hearts—we must not simply know the Word or grow in our knowledge of the Word. We must also grant the Word access to the deepest regions of our hearts. We cannot afford to be a mile wide and an inch deep. Let the Word into your heart.

Scholar Alister McGrath writes of his former approach to the Scriptures: “Up to this point, I had thought that we were meant to increase our factual knowledge of events. For example, when reading a text about the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, it was important to be able to find Galilee on a map, understand its cultural history, see how this fitted into the general patterns of Jesus’ ministry, and even try to date the event. Yet this led to nothing more than the accumulation of facts. It did not excite or challenge me.”<sup>3</sup>

## Giving the Word access

How is the Word to work its way into our hearts and excite or challenge us? Consider this approach offered by Marjorie Thompson in her book *Soul Feast* as one way to give the word of God access to your heart:

*Choose a passage of Scripture no longer than a few verses. Begin by reaffirming that the purpose of this reading is to let yourself be addressed by the living God. Remind yourself of God’s presence with you, whether you sense him or not. Give thanks, and ask for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit.*

*Begin to read slowly, pausing between phrases and sentences. For some, silent reading allows the mind to wander, so reading aloud or whispering is preferable. Let the words echo and resonate in your mind. Allow meanings to sink in, associations to arise, and images to surface. If a word or phrase seems especially significant to you, remain with it, turning it over in your mind and heart.*

*Once you have heard a word that seems meant for you, start ruminating on it. Why is this a word for you? What is it about your life right now that needs to hear this word? What does God seem to be saying to you through this word?*

*Let your prayer emerge from your encounter with this text. How do you find yourself praying for your own need? How does this word move you to pray for others? Allow your prayer to flow spontaneously from the heart, expressing as fully as you can what surfaces out of your listening.*

*Release all your thoughts, feelings, and intentions to God. There is no further need to listen, reflect, imagine, or respond. There is simply an invitation to return to a place of rest near the heart of God, where you may be at peace.<sup>4</sup>*

When I practiced this discipline with 1 Samuel 19, the first verse surfaced for me, and the word “delight” in that verse: “And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, Saul’s son, delighted much in David.” In my study, I have multiple photos and mementos of people and events and avocations that delight me: my family, a trout stream, baseball, a hill town in Italy, trips to foreign lands to preach the Word. Jonathan delighted much in David. I wondered: do I delight much in the Son of David? As I brought before God my delight much in certain people, events, and avocations, I acknowledged them as gifts from him, gifts from the Son of David, and I was drawn to him. And I thought that if he would give such gifts, doesn’t he delight in me? I mean, would he give such gifts to someone he didn’t delight in? So, for a few moments, I felt his delight in me, which animated my delight in him. For a few moments, I shared delight with the Son of David. Yes, God delights much in me, and I delight much in him.

Put emotional distance between you and a controlling person by letting the word into your heart.

## Delighting in Christ

Well, today is Steve Zeisler Day. How do we relate this text to Steve? Steve is Jonathan! As Jonathan delighted much in David, Steve has delighted in Christ, the Son of David. And he delights in the church of Christ, PBC in particular, and we are much the beneficiaries. I’ve been a pastor at this church for twenty-one years. At some churches, that’s a long time. Here, that’s not even half a Zeisler! Thank you, Steve! We love you!

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alan Ruston, “Neville Chamberlain” (Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society).
- <sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Pfeffer, “Good Leaders don’t have to be ‘Good’” (Time magazine, September 28, 2015), 27.
- <sup>3</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 16-19).
- <sup>4</sup> Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).