

## The Mercy of God Towards Saul

Passages: 1 Samuel 16:1–23

Luke 11:9–13

Have you ever read the book or seen the movie called *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson? The story goes like this:

- Dr. Jekyll is a chemist who believes that the soul is made up of two separate characters, good and evil, which live in continuous conflict with each other.
- In his laboratory, Dr. Jekyll successfully creates two potions which separate these two aspects of human nature: One potion transforms him into a man who is fully and completely evil, while the second transforms him back into the affable man that he is normally known to be.
- For some months, the 2 potions work well and Dr. Jekyll is able to freely explore his 'other self'; a man he eventually names Edward Hyde; a man entirely comfortable in morally corrupt behaviour.
- One day, however, the experiment goes too far—Mr. Hyde brutally murders a man! Immediately, Dr. Jekyll ceases using the potions.
- Sadly, it is too late! Dr. Jekyll has given too much power to his evil nature. Now, every time he falls asleep, he reverts to Mr. Hyde without the assistance of the potion. What he hadn't realised is that the more he gave in to his evil side, the more he unwittingly strengthened Mr. Hyde's power!
- The only way to resolve this tension is through suicide. And that's how the story ends!

It's interesting to see just how similar this story of Jekyll and Hyde is to the Biblical story of King Saul. Over the past two weeks, we've seen the good side of Saul. He was the pattern of ideal humanity; acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with his God. Saul submitted himself to God's Word and to God's Spirit. As a result, King Saul was God's instrument to bring peace and prosperity to Israel, making her a light

to the nations! In his humanity, the people of Israel found their true humanity! Indeed, Saul was a great leader for almost twenty years.

**But, gradually, things went from bad to worse.** As Saul chose to listen to the other spirits around him—the spirits of pride and self-conceit—which encouraged him to disobey God’s Word, the more he grieved God’s Spirit.

Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, there was a huge battle waging war inside of Saul!

The saddest consequence of this interior battle was the slow process of demonization that took place in Saul.

In today’s passage from 1 Samuel 16, verse 14 tells us that, as God's Spirit withdrew from Saul **"an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him."** Now, what does this mean? To start with, it cannot mean that God sent evil spirits to torment Saul. God is not the author of evil. Rather, these words reflect the idea (prevalent throughout the Scriptures) that God gave Saul over to the evil spirits with which he had already been engaging—the spirits of pride, self-conceit, anger and jealousy.

Back in chapter 15, Samuel had already warned Saul that he was playing around with the demonic when he said; “For rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance is like the evil of idolatry.” (1 Samuel 15:23) The more that Saul played gave in to these forces of evil, the more God’s Spirit was grieved. The final straw came when God’s Spirit was so grieved that He withdrew entirely from Saul. This meant that Saul was now “free” to reap the full consequences of his own choices! The spirits were also free; free to torment Saul.

The parallels with Jekyll and Hyde are undeniable! In the end, Saul eventually commits suicide (he falls on his sword) as his only means of escape.

And yet, despite the parallels, there is one more thing we need to say about the story of Saul; one truth that is not found in the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. For, you see, even though God has withdrawn His Spirit from Saul and exposed him to the consequences of his own foolish choices, God's grace towards King Saul still prevails! Or, to put it another way: **Although Saul has given up on God, God has never given up on Saul!**

**Turn with me to 1 Samuel 16.**

At the beginning of this chapter, the author focuses our attention on the appointment and anointing of a new king in Israel...someone who will eventually take Saul's place. And so, when the shepherd-boy, David, is divinely chosen to be Israel's new King, the same pattern that happened with Saul is repeated here—David is filled with God's Spirit.

But does this mean that Saul is now discarded as king? Not at all! Not only is David a king-in-waiting, but David's first task as king-in-waiting is to serve the current king, Saul! How will he serve Saul? Amazingly, the Spirit of God will so transform David's harp playing that it becomes a divine tool of ministry in his hands...a tool designed to comfort the king and bring him back to his true senses!

Of course, Saul must recognise and accept his need. In verse 17, he says to his servant "Find someone who plays well and bring him to me." Saul humbly asks, seeks and knocks. Only then is God's help forthcoming as God brings David to his side as his comforter and healer.

Do you see? God has not given up on Saul. Rather, He watches and waits; always concerned...always hopeful. As God says in Ezekiel 33: **“For I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live!”** Indeed, God’s great patience and perseverance with Saul is evident over the next 14 chapters...until Saul’s death. Time and again, God’s grace is shown to Saul through this man, David! Even when Saul is increasingly demonised (to the point of seeking the aid of the witch of Endor), still God shows mercy to him through David (1 Samuel 24:1–22, 26:1–25). Even though Saul repeatedly tries to kill David, God’s mercy is still shown to him! (see 18:10–11, 19:9–10)

What’s most amazing in this story is that God will even give his Spirit back to Saul temporarily (1 Samuel 19:20–24), enabling Saul to prophesy. Why does God do this? Perhaps God wants to give Saul another taste of what he has forsaken? I don’t know. But one thing I do know is that God **“take(s) no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live!”**

**So, what are the lessons to be learned from this?**

Well, like the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, I think Saul’s life is meant to be a parable of the human race! It tells us how the entire human race has reaped what it has sown! As the human race has given itself over to evil, it has, to some degree at least, been demonised! Just go back to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Originally, God’s Spirit was given to Adam and Eve in fullest measure. They were to live by the Spirit. They were to be kings over the earth. Their own personal spirits were to be energized and enlivened by the Spirit of God.

However, as their disobedience to God's Word increased, the Spirit of God in them was increasingly grieved. They forfeited their power to rule. By the time we get to Genesis 6, God actually says to Noah, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal—his days will be 120 years." Whatever you make of this verse, one thing it seems to tell us is that God has decided to withdraw His Spirit from human beings.

To put it another way; every human being is just like King Saul! We were all created to be kings over this earth. But as a result of our continued disobedience to God's Word and our willingness to listen to other spirits, we have so grieved God's Spirit that He has decided to "give us over" to those spirits—the spirits of anger, lust, jealousy, violence, pride...! The whole human race is easy pickings to their lies and deceit.

However, this does not mean that God has given up on us! To the contrary, as with Saul, God is still very present and very near...and **His mercy still persists over us**, no matter what we have done to grieve Him! Sure, the Bible says that

**"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!"** (Rom 3:23) That is true—we've all grieved the Spirit of God who made us. And so, in one sense, He has 'withdrawn from us'. However, the Bible goes on (just 2 chapters later!) to confirm another truth—that, **"Even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."**

What does that mean? It means two things:

1. We are deeply loved!
2. In order to save us from our madness, God has chosen and anointed a new king... for us! This King, Jesus, abundantly anointed by the Spirit, now comes to serve us in our madness.

Of course, as it was with Saul, so it is true with us-- We must humbly "ask, seek and knock"! In humble awareness of our interior madness, we must invite this new king to come and live with us, and to play his songs of love over us, bringing us comfort in his forgiveness and restoring us to sanity by the Spirit of God. As we ask, seek and knock, God promises to revive us with His Spirit once again.

You know, what I always find interesting in the Gospel stories is how, even when people come to Jesus with obvious needs like blindness or leprosy, Jesus still asks them one simple question: **"What do you want me to do for you?"** The point, I think, is simple: Jesus wants them to recognise their need and to be humble enough to ask, seek and knock!

There's one last parallel with King Saul that I want to mention: Although David was sent to minister to Saul's madness, Saul would often resist him or even try to kill him! In the same way, when God sent Jesus to minister to our madness, how many times has the world resisted Him? Indeed, unlike Saul, we even succeeded in killing this agent of God's grace by hanging him, naked, on a cross! And yet, look at Him! This king Jesus even comes back from the grave to minister His grace to us! As it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, **"How shall we escape if we neglect such a salvation?"**

But this is the possible outcome, isn't it? If we, like Saul, repeatedly reject this new King's gestures of love and mercy, not only will it drive us into greater madness and hardness of heart, but over time, we can be so racked by growing guilt, shame, superstition and fear that we look to death as the only solution. That would be such a tragedy... because, even if we die, we cannot escape the grace of God! What does the Psalmist say? **"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? Even if I go to Hades, you are there!"**

The better option is to turn back to God and live...to be re-anointed by the Holy Spirit of God in the humble recognition of His unquenchable love for you...forever putting an end to the tensions between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde!

Let's pray.