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## THE ZOMBIE VIRUS 1 Samuel 18

Recently Laurie and I went into the Under Armour store at the outlet mall in Carlsbad. I was looking for some light weight shirts that they have. My visit there bothered me a little. I found the shirt I was looking for, but the display caused me a little problem. Have you seen the mannequins they have in those stores? They have these faceless plastic men that have shoulders as big as huge boulders and arms that are the size of my legs. The arms barely fit through the sleeves and stretch to the max. I found myself trying to stand taller and be bigger. Inside I'm thinking, "Yeah, that's what I ought to look like." Those mannequins make me feel inferior.

We all have our insecurities. Many years ago when I was single for a time I worked out with a few of my friends under the tutelage of another buddy who had just finished his eligibility as a division 1 football player. For reasons I've never really understood a couple of them chose to tease me about my less than massive physique. Even then I knew it was in jest, for their physiques were no better, but the funny thing about that is I can remember their words clearly 40 years later. Even thinking about it today creates an unpleasant feeling.

We all know about self-consciousness, feelings of inadequacy, insecurity. What we may not always see is the negative effects those feelings can have on us. In fact they can distort our whole lives. Today in 1 Samuel 18 we will catch a glimpse of that happening to someone, and hopefully learn to deal with it in our lives.

### DAVID WAS GREATLY LOVED

At this point David has been designated by God to be the next king of Israel though the current King, Saul, was unaware of that. David has defeated the Philistine warrior Goliath and has been brought into Saul's court where he uses his musical ability to try to calm Saul during his increasingly frequent emotional storms. There is a theme that runs throughout this chapter. It is that as David became more and more known he was more and more loved. We see that right at the very beginning of the chapter. We are told in verse 3 that Saul's son Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. We will see that Jonathan and David became as tight as brothers. In fact, Jonathan gave David his robe, his sword, even his belt. This was a sign of not only his great friendship with David but his awareness that David would be the next king, even though in the course of normal events Jonathan would've inherited the throne from his father, Saul.

All the people knew about David's great victory over Goliath and were thrilled with it. But that was not the end of David's exploits that they celebrated. According to verse 13 Saul sent David away to command troops in the Army. David was as successful there as he had been with everything else. The result according to verse 16 was, "all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns."

Then there was Michal, the younger daughter of Saul. As we will see, Saul initially pretended to offer his older daughter, Merab, to David as a wife. That didn't work out in part because David was so humble he did not think he was worthy of marrying the princess. He also didn't think he could afford her. However, the younger daughter, according to verse 20, was in love with David. Verse 28 repeats that Michal loved David. In that case love won out. It took some heroic efforts on David's part because it required that he kill 100 Philistines in an allotted period of time. True love is not to be denied. David killed 200 and the couple was married. Michal was thrilled, because she loved David.

David's twitter account was trending up at a dizzying pace. Very quickly after Saul became aware of David he found that all of the people loved David and his own son and daughter loved David. David was winning friends and influencing people everywhere he went.

### SAUL WAS FATALLY INSECURE

After the defeat of the Philistine army precipitated by David's victory Goliath, the Army returned to a tumultuous celebration. As they made their way back to Jerusalem people came out of the towns and out of the city of Jerusalem itself and cheered the troops. They sang and danced to honor them. They even made up songs to celebrate them and that's where the trouble began. The women sang according to verse 7, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." Uh oh.

You have probably heard about the kinds of demands made by Hollywood personalities with inflated and often fragile egos. Reportedly Angelina Jolie demanded that one studio pay for flying lessons for Brad Pitt even though that had nothing to do with the movie she was making. One cast member was fired from a movie by Mike Myers simply because he looked Myers in the eye. When egos are vastly inflated and touchy it creates huge problems with things like billing and credit. In 1955 great actors Spencer Tracy and Humphrey Bogart agreed to make a movie together called *The Desperate Hours*. Tracy and Bogart were friends but

there was a disagreement over who would get top billing. When he learned that Bogart would get top billing instead of him Tracy pulled out of the movie.

When it comes to inflated and fragile egos, Saul was the poster child. He had to have top billing in everything. When he heard the people singing that he had slain thousands of enemies and David had slain tens of thousands of enemies he had a fit. Had he been an actor Saul would have gone into his luxurious on set trailer and sulked, refusing to come out. His reaction is pitiful. According to verse 8 he whined, “they have credited David with tens of thousands, but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” Well yes that’s a rational conclusion isn’t it? The people are praising David for his victories on the battlefield so the obvious conclusion is next they’ll give him the kingdom. That would be like President Obama going all neurotic and assuming that because people are praising LeBron James more than him after LeBron won the NBA championship that they’re going to impeach him and make LeBron President. How dumb would that be? Well, he has had a better year than the President.

The sad part of that is the people intended no slight of Saul. Their little song was not literal. Saul had not killed thousands of enemy and David had not killed tens of thousands. This was typical exaggeration as a way of exalting these two heroes. The people did not mean it to be a competition in which David was the winner. The reality was that David had done the greater thing that no one else in the Army, including Saul, could or would do. It was a simple fact. David had killed Goliath, and no one else had been willing to even attempt that. He deserved top billing. Unfortunately Saul couldn’t bear that thought.

Whenever we try to ground our identity or worth in a position, an achievement or some ability we have we set ourselves up for the kind of insecurity Saul displayed. Despite the fact that he has appeared in more than 70 movies and television shows, has won two Academy Awards and is far and away one of his generations leading actors, Tom Hanks says he still finds himself doubting his own abilities. Recently he said, “no matter what we’ve done there comes a point where you think how did I get here? When are they going to discover that I am, in fact, a fraud and take everything away from me?” He goes on to say, “there are days when I know that 3 o’clock tomorrow afternoon I am going to have to deliver some degree of emotional goods, and if I can’t do it that means I’m going to have to fake it. If I fake it, that means they might catch me faking it, and if they catch me faking it, well, that is just doomsday.”

Having doomsday always hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles is a grim, soul sapping way to live. The problem for us is we all have our own sense of inadequacy and insecurity. I often think surely there are some people who get to the place where they are so successful that they no longer struggle with such things. It is hard to imagine being more successful than Tom Hanks and he still fears that someone is finally going to discover that he is a fake. What does this sense that we are faking it, that we don't measure up, that we are afraid someone is going to find out the truth about us, do to us? Look at the effects that it had on Saul and you will see.

**It caused him to feel threatened unnecessarily.**

Have you ever been around someone who seemed touchy, quickly offended, easily threatened by things that were no threat to them? We see that displayed in this chapter. The song the people were singing was intended to be praise and express appreciation for Saul. But for him it was an insult. He completely misinterpreted the intent and turned a positive into a negative. Was that David's fault? Was that the fault of the people singing the song? No, it was all on Saul. It was a threat that he manufactured in his own mind, created in the blast furnace of his insecurity.

I have made many mistakes in ministry. One of them happened in the first couple of years after Laurie and I helped plant a church in this area. One Sunday I had one of our leaders read the passage in the worship service that I was going to teach before I spoke. The passage happened to be Luke 19:11 -27, which was the parable of the 10 minas. A mina was an ancient coin. The word is used repeatedly in that passage. When I spoke, I said, "Hey, that passage made Paul sounded like a myna bird, didn't it?" It was intended as a lighthearted pun about the repeated use of the word. After the service he came to talk to me and he was angry. He was deeply offended. He said I was mocking his voice, comparing it to a bird. I told him that was not my meaning at all, it was just a little joke about the word mina. It didn't matter. He never forgave me. I learned a lesson about dumb little throwaway lines, but I also learned something about him. He misinterpreted what I said and turned it into a slight though that was not at all my intent. That was totally because of his own insecurity. In his mind he had been ridiculed and he would never let go of it. He quickly was no longer a part of our church.

**It caused him to be emotionally tormented.**

Verse 10 is a bit jarring. It says the day after the big celebration an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. Then it goes on to say he was prophesying in his house while David was playing the lyre. Wait, an evil spirit from God? It came on Saul while he was prophesying? That's just bizarre.

First, understand that in the writer's thoroughly theological worldview God is behind everything that happens. Ultimately if an evil spirit comes upon Saul that is because God allowed that or caused that to happen. Secondly we need to understand that the writer is not using the term evil spirit in the sense of a demon. In our vernacular the writer's meaning was close to being in a foul mood. As he contemplated all of David's success compared with him Saul got increasingly upset and depressed.

But what about this prophesying thing? Once again we have to understand what the writer was saying, not how we tend to interpret it. At times in those days when a prophet was actually speaking from God sometimes they appeared to not be in control of themselves, that some divine spirit was actually controlling them in the way they behaved and spoke. If you know anything about the Old Testament you know that sometimes prophets did some pretty strange things. The writer of this account will use that term several times to mean something along the lines of ranting and raving, because that's how prophets came across at times. That's how he uses it here. So the picture is David is over there playing some peaceful and soothing tunes on his guitar in hopes of cheering Saul up and Saul is just going off, raving away. He's getting more and more upset by the second. Finally he grabs a spear fires it at David. Would you say this is rational behavior? Does this look like the actions of someone who is experiencing joy and peace? This guy's own insecurities have made his life a living hell. And all of that pain is being produced inside of him.

Do you know who Rhonda Rousey is? She was the youngest woman ever to qualify for the Olympics at age 14. She was the first woman from the USA ever to win an Olympic medal in judo. Then she transitioned into mixed martial arts where she became a world champion. In November of last year she was undefeated in MMA and only one opponent had even survived the first round against her. *Sports Illustrated* named her the world's most dominant athlete. And then last November she lost. She lost badly. In an interview shortly after that devastating loss she said, "I was literally sitting there and thinking about killing myself. At that exact second I'm like, I'm nothing. What do I do anymore? No one cares about me anymore without this."

Her whole identity was wrapped up in being the undefeated dominant athlete. And when she lost she felt she was good for nothing. If she couldn't be that undefeated person she was nothing. That's kind of how Saul felt about himself.

**It destroyed his relationships with those who loved him.**

We can start with the people of Israel. At this point they love the guy. One of the main things they wanted him to do was to defend them from the Philistines. He pulled that off and they were thrilled. They were singing his praises. But in his mind they were praising David more and that made him mad. It caused him to see even his own people as something of a threat.

But it gets much worse. There is poor David, the guy who has done nothing but try to support him. David put his own life in grave jeopardy in order to win a battle for Saul. Now he's in Saul's court as a loyal subject just trying to do his best to help his king out, and what did Saul do? He tried to kill him. Have you ever had someone you counted as a friend actually seek to do you harm? I've had that happen. In case you don't know, it doesn't make for very harmonious relationships.

Did you see what happens with Saul's daughters? First, he tries to use the older one as a lure to put David in precarious military situations in hopes that the Philistines will do his dirty work for him. When that doesn't work he's thrilled to discover that his second daughter loves David. Isn't that wonderful? Any father would be thrilled to know that his daughter had found a godly and eminently admirable young man to spend her life with. Personally one of the great joys of my life has happened when my son and my daughter found terrific godly people to marry. What a delight. I thank God for them every day. What was Saul's reaction? He was thrilled too, but for a very different reason. Verse 21 says he thought "I will give her to him so that she may be a snare to him and so the hand of the Philistines may be against him."

Saul's insecurity caused him to be so obsessed with himself that he was willing to have an innocent and godly young man, David, killed, and he was willing to sacrifice the happiness of his own daughter to get what he wanted. There is a powerful lesson for us in this. When we are insecure and obsessed with ourselves we will do damage to people we love. We make it nearly impossible for them to have a true healthy loving relationship with us.

#### APPLICATION

We have seen how Saul's insecurity and addiction to himself actually devastated his own life. We all have our insecurities, and we are also addicted to self. This will have to one degree or another effects on us that are along the same lines as the effects they had on Saul. How can we guard against the Saul problem?

## WATCH FOR SYMPTOMS

In movies about the zombie apocalypse sometimes it is a virus that supposedly turns people into zombies. The virus is spread when a zombie bites or scratches a previously healthy person. In *World War Z* a bite from a zombie could turn a healthy person into a zombie in 12 seconds, but in others it could take some time. Of course, once that happens that person is watched carefully for signs that he or she has become infected and is turning into a zombie.

Poor Saul was turned into a spiritual zombie. He became infected with a spiritual virus that turned him into a terrible monster. Unfortunately for us we can be infected by that same virus, and we don't have to be bitten or scratched by Saul to have it happen. We should watch carefully for symptoms of an outbreak in our own souls.

In the very early years of my pastoral ministry I went to monthly meetings of a group of pastors who were part of the same denomination that I was in at the time. All of the pastors of the churches in the San Diego area would get together. At one point there was a new pastor who began coming to our meetings. He had started a new church in the area. This guy was clearly a favorite of the man who oversaw all the pastors in this particular denomination in Southern California. He was a very intelligent guy and was very gifted. He was dynamic and charismatic. Fairly quickly he became the dominant person in those meetings

I began noticing that I wasn't enjoying going to those meetings. I realized I was looking for excuses for missing them. When I went was happy when it was over and I didn't have to think about it for another month. It eventually occurred to me that I needed to pay attention to that. What was going on? What was bothering me about those meetings? When I took time to think about it, I realized that I didn't like being around that guy. He hadn't done anything to me. He hadn't wronged anyone. But I just didn't want to be around him. I realized that probably wasn't a good thing because everyone else seemed to think he was great. So what was my problem? I asked myself that and didn't much like the answer. My problem was I was showing signs of having been infected with the zombie virus.

I was young, inexperienced, not seeing results that I had imagined for myself, and insecure. The charismatic new guy was hitting on my insecurities as a pastor. His church was growing rapidly. Mine was growing, but at a glacial pace. People admired him for his great skills and intelligence and personality, things that I wished they would admire me for. My insecurity and focus on myself kept me from having a better relationship with that guy.

Several years later that same guy morally imploded and his ministry blew up. I didn't see it coming. I probably couldn't have done anything about it even if I had, but I have sometimes wondered if I could've really cared about the guy as a friend maybe I could've helped him. There were a couple of warning signs but I didn't notice them because of my own personal issues.

When you are easily offended, when you get your feelings hurt because of things that in retrospect are utterly unimportant or in fact not hurtful at all, when you find yourself obsessed with your own position and with the need to have other people recognize you and serve you, that should serve as a warning sign. You are showing signs of the zombie virus.

### **BELIEVE THE LORD IS WITH YOU**

The Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, but had come upon David. At some level Saul knew that God had left him. That was part of his increasing desperation and irrationality. David was just the opposite. Verse 14 says, "In everything he did he had success because the Lord was with him." Remember what David said when he faced a frightening Philistine, Goliath. In 1 Samuel 17:45-46 he said, "you come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, you down and cut off your head." David wasn't confident because he knew he was better or stronger than Goliath, he was confident because he knew God Almighty with him. He took that knowledge and the confidence that went with it everywhere he went.

Our terrific son-in-law, Michael, is now approaching a transition in his life. He will soon leave the Marines and is currently beginning his search for a job as an airline pilot. Recently when he and Carissa were visiting here we set up a meeting for him with a good friend of ours who works for American airlines. Part of the purpose of the meeting was networking, but a large part also was to give Michael the opportunity to get some insights on the airline business and the search for a job in it from our friend. Our friend, to no surprise to us, was very affirming of Michael. In his words he thought Michael was prime beef. In other words, he thought Michael will have no difficulty getting a job. He felt confident that Michael will get multiple offers. However, it also turned out that our friend is a good friend of the chief pilot of American Airlines. Michael is fairly sure he will get an offer for a job. And of course it is always encouraging when someone in the know confirms that he is indeed a slam dunk candidate. However, think of how different it would be if the chief pilot of American Airlines were to say that he is going to see to it



that this young man is offered a job with American. Think of how much more confident Michael would be if he was essentially guaranteed a job because he knew the chief pilot was looking out for him. David didn't just have a chief pilot looking out for him so he could get a job, he had the God of the universe, the Almighty God, with him looking out for him everywhere he went.

As a follower of Jesus Christ you have the same thing. The Almighty God goes with you everywhere you go and he is looking out for your best interest at every moment of every day. Even when you are sleeping God is with you looking out for you. Psalm 91:1 says, "whoever dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." In verse 4 the psalmist wrote, "under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." In verse 11 it says, "he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

We can have tremendous confidence as we go through our days as God is with us. In Ephesians 1:3-5 Paul wrote that God "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ." Before the creation of the world you are chosen to be God's child in Jesus Christ. Nothing can change that. Nothing can threaten it.

Much of the stress, frustration and conflict that we experience in life and that we bring into the lives of others, comes from the fact we are striving desperately to convince ourselves and others of something about ourselves. We are continually obsessing over the effort to prove that we have worth, that we are significant, that we are someone in this world. Three years ago David Brooks the writer had an article in the *New York Times* about baseball player Alex Rodriguez. He described how A-Rod is one of the best players in the history of baseball. By the beginning of the 2000's he had already guaranteed himself a place in the baseball Hall of Fame. As a result he had made more money than he could possibly ever conceive of spending. And yet it wasn't enough for him. He ended up tarnishing his reputation horribly by cheating through the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Why would he do this? Brooks wrote, "self preoccupied people have trouble seeing that their talents come from outside themselves and can only be developed when directed toward something outside themselves. Enclosed in self, they come to believe that their talents come from self and are for themselves... Locked in a cycle of insecurity and self validation, their talents are never enough, and they end up devouring what they have been given."

What a great description of Saul. He was locked in a cycle of insecurity and self validation and he did indeed devour what he had been given. He was a victim of the zombie virus. David was freed from that deadly cycle. He knew who God had made him to be and he knew that God was with him so he had nothing to prove and to trust God to bring about his will in his life.

When our kids were young they participated in many neighborhood games that typically were centered around our house. There were a lot of different kinds of activities including many baseball, roller hockey, and football games in the street. Sometimes it seemed like more arguing took place than actually playing the games. It seemed that these games took on life and death importance. From the kids perspective the best thing that could happen was when dad going in the game with them. I think maybe that partly because when I played arguments got settled quickly and we spent a lot more time playing. On a number of occasions I would take one person, most often Carissa, on my team and the two of us would take on four or five kids on the other team. This would typically be met with an objection from my lone teammate that we were unfairly outnumbered. The objection was there's no way we can win. And that's an unbearable situation because losing was unbearable. Those objections always went unheeded. I would always tell my frustrated teammate, "so what?" I had nothing at stake. Neither winning nor losing made any kind of statement whatsoever about my identity or my value as a person. So I was free to just go play without worrying about the outcome. When we believe that God is with us, believe that he has chosen us and that we have infinite worth in Christ, then we are free to stop being obsessed with ourselves. We can be secure, free of the zombie virus.

### LIVE IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS

Philippians 2: 5-8 says, "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross."

What do you think would have happened if Saul had the same mindset that Jesus had? He would never have lost the throne in the first place because he would have obeyed God to begin with. But if somehow he had lost the throne would he have been threatened when people sang the praises of David? No, he would have humbled himself as Jesus did. He would have rejoiced in David's success. He would have accepted God's decision to replace him on the throne with grace and humility. All of the awful stuff in his life would have been avoided. If we had the

same mindset as Jesus it would immediately resolve most of the relational problems in our lives. It would cure the zombie virus in an instant.

At the cross of Jesus our pride is obliterated because we are confronted there with pride's terrible result. This is what it caused. At the cross our need for acceptance, our desperate longing to prove our worth is ended, for we see that in Christ we are accepted and loved beyond our ability to understand. At the cross our addiction to serving ourselves is cured, as we see how Jesus refused to serve himself, but served his Father by loving and serving us even when it cost him immeasurable pain.

I had chicken pox when I was a kid, like most of you. I thought I was done with it forever. It was with some dismay that I learned well into my adult years that the varicella zoster virus that causes chicken pox is still alive in me. Once you have it you have it for life. It can show up in your later years as shingles, a very painful condition. Fortunately there is now a vaccine for it. There is another virus alive in you. It is the zombie virus. By virtue of being human you have it. Medical science has no vaccine for it. But if you don't deal with it you will experience its awful effects. In fact you are experiencing them. That's why the human race has so many problems. The one thing that can defeat it is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is in knowing that because of what Jesus did for you that you are forgiven, loved by God unconditionally, that you have nothing to prove anymore, that nothing can threaten your value in him or your hope. It is then in that confidence following the pattern that Jesus gave us in the cross, given yourself up to love others.