

# OpenTheo

## July 29th: 1 Samuel 18 & 2 Corinthians 12:1-13

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The hearts of all drawn to the beloved David. Caught up to paradise and a thorn in the flesh.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

1 Samuel chapter 18. As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house.

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war.

And this was good in the sight of all the people, and also in the sight of Saul's servants. As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to

one another as they celebrated, Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day on. The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day.

Saul had his spear in his hand, and Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, I will pin David to the wall. But David evaded him twice. Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, but had departed from Saul.

So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand. And he went out and came in before the people. And David had success in all his undertakings, for the Lord was with him.

And when Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in fearful awe of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, for he went out and came in before them. Then Saul said to David, Here is my elder daughter Merab.

I will give her to you for a wife. Only be valiant for me and fight the Lord's battles. For Saul thought, Let not my hand be against him, but let the hand of the Philistines be against him.

And David said to Saul, Who am I, and who are my relatives, my father's clan in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king? But at the time when Merab, Saul's daughter, should have been given to David, she was given to Adriel the Meholothite for a wife. Now Saul's daughter Michael loved David. And they told Saul, and the thing pleased him.

Saul thought, Let me give her to him, that she may be a snare for him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him. Therefore Saul said to David a second time, You shall now be my son-in-law. And Saul commanded his servants, Speak to David in private and say, Behold, the king has delight in you, and all his servants love you.

Now then, become the king's son-in-law. And Saul's servants spoke these words in the ears of David. And David said, Does it seem to you a little thing to become the king's son-in-law, since I am a poor man and have no reputation? And the servants of Saul told him.

Thus and so did David speak. Then Saul said, Thus shall you say to David, The king desires no bride price except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king's enemies. Now Saul thought to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines.

And when his servants told David these words, it pleased David well to be the king's son-in-law. Before the time had expired, David arose and went along with his men and killed two hundred of the Philistines. And David brought their foreskins, which were given in full number to the king, that he might become the king's son-in-law.

And Saul gave him his daughter Michal for a wife. But when Saul saw and knew that the Lord was with David, and that Michal, Saul's daughter, loved him, Saul was even more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy continually.

Then the commanders of the Philistines came out to battle. And as often as they came out, David had more success than all the servants of Saul, so that his name was highly esteemed. At the start of 1 Samuel chapter 18, David is taken into the house of Saul, where he prospers.

There is a sort of adoption taking place here. Saul takes him into his own household completely, and doesn't allow him to return to his father's house anymore. Jonathan also makes a sort of covenant of brotherhood with David.

When later David receives the kingdom, he receives it to someone who was a member of Saul's own household. We should also consider the grace that God is showing to Saul here, and the way that Saul is his own worst enemy. Saul was prepared to kill his own son Jonathan in chapter 14, cutting off the crown prince until the people stopped him.

The Lord brought Saul's fate upon him, largely by his own hand. God gives Saul his successor as a member of his own house. Had Saul been righteous, he would have recognised God's remarkable grace in this.

If Saul had supported David, he would have had his divinely blessed successor as his adopted son, and later son-in-law, and would experience blessing on account of him. David was well inclined towards Saul and his household, so Saul would have fared very well had he repented and discovered the grace in the Lord's judgement. David, whose name means beloved, was a man after God's own heart, and a man who won over the hearts of almost everyone who met him, soon causing Saul to fear his power to alienate the affections of his people, and even his own household.

While it might appear that David was just a member of Saul's household, matters soon start to take a surprising turn. Because of the love that he had for the young man, Jonathan made a covenant with David. He took off his robe and armour, and gave them to David.

The significance of this act really needs to be noted. Jonathan was the crown prince and the heir to the throne. His robes and armour were marks of his office, and by taking these off and giving these to David, he is symbolically, even if not intentionally and explicitly, abdicating his position and giving it to David.

David's later rise to rule was not a rebellious or revolutionary act, but was just and righteous. Jonathan progressively relinquished his own position to him. Why did Jonathan so love David? If we look back through the story, the answer shouldn't be hard to discover.

David is just like Jonathan. If two men were ever kindred spirits, these two were. Both of them single-handedly fought the Philistines, endearing feats of bravery, when everyone else was fearful.

They trusted in the Lord to enable them, over numbers or weapons. Jonathan was the son of Saul. David was Saul's son-in-law.

Both led Israel to victory. The exhilarating courage and faith of Jonathan stands out against the bleak background of Saul's fear in chapters 13 and 14. When David comes on his horizon, Jonathan finally finds a man after his own heart.

I imagine that it was fairly discouraging for him being surrounded by the fear, paranoia and unbelief of Saul's court. David brought a remarkable shift in the spirit of the place. David prospered in Saul's service.

However, as Saul heard the women praising David for killing his tens of thousands, but only praising him for killing thousands, he became very angry and jealous, and cast a spear at David while he was playing music for him. The women's song is reminiscent of the song of Miriam and the women after the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The thousands, tens of thousands pairing is unlikely to be an actual suggestion that David has killed more than Saul.

It's simply using the standard parallelism of Hebrew poetry for an intensifying effect. The lines are synonymous but intensifying. We see a similar paralleling of ten thousand and a thousand in Psalm 91 verse 7. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

Saul chooses then to take the song of the women in the worst of possible ways. The actual purpose of the song was to celebrate the power of the Lord to deliver his people, through Saul and David, not to pit Israel's champions against each other. The spirit had now departed from Saul, the giant of Israel, and it was apparent to Saul that the spirit was now with his servant David.

Saul was possessed by a distressing spirit and David's music brought him relief. However, twice Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his spear, in verses 10 to 12. In the previous chapter, David encountered a giant with a spear, Goliath, and from chapter 18 onwards David is threatened by the spear-wielding giant of Saul.

Saul takes on characteristics of Goliath and the spear of Saul becomes his identifying instrument in the following chapters. David is raised up and prospers in all that he does.

He acts wisely, he is a new Joseph, he has made a commander of a thousand, and David is probably not even twenty yet so this might be an honorific role for a member of the king's household at this point rather than an actual assignment.

However, honorific or not, he soon proves skilled in the Israel and Judah, the two halves of the nation, both love David. Israel is united in and by their love for this young man. Saul had promised David his daughter Merab in marriage but he ended up giving Merab to another man instead.

As Peter Lighthouse points out, David's experience in Saul's house echoes that of Jacob in the house of Laban. David experienced hostility from his brothers. He left his father's house, he prospers, he starts to be feared or resented, a daughter is offered to him as a wife and then withdrawn and then he becomes a son-in-law.

Saul's daughter Michael loved David and so Saul offered her as a wife to David, hoping that she would be a snare to him, taking his side against David. But Michael loved David, the only woman in the Old Testament narratives who is described as loving a man. David has little money for a bride price, the bride price was the customary sum that would be paid for a woman like Michael and Saul would be unlikely to want to give his daughter as a lower class concubine.

She would be expected to have the honor of independent money provided by her prospective bridegroom. And Saul suggests an alternative, in lieu of a bride price he will accept 100 Philistine foreskins, hoping that David would be killed by his enemies. David doubles the sum and gives him 200.

Like Jacob did for Rachel, he pays double the bride price to marry the younger daughter. Lighthouse suggests here that there might be an allusion back to the events of Gilgal. Israel had been circumcised en masse in Joshua chapter 5 at Gilgal in order to remove the reproach of Egypt after crossing the Jordan.

Saul had twice failed and been rejected by the Lord in Gilgal, once in chapter 13 and again in chapter 15. In chapter 17 David spoke of the Philistines as uncircumcised and spoke also of the need to remove the reproach from Israel. In the mass circumcision of Philistines David might be doing this in some way.

Michael is given to him and rather than serving Saul against her husband she aligns with him, causing her father to fear David all the more. In verse 23 David spoke of himself as a poor man of no reputation, as lightly esteemed. However in verse 30, after his remarkable success, he is described again but now as highly esteemed.

Saul by now is very fearful of David. He recognises that all the signs are there, that the Lord is with David and that he is his successor. The power of David throughout this chapter is in large part the power of being the beloved.

He is the one who is loved by Israel and Judah. He is the one who is loved by Jonathan. He is the one who is loved by Michael.

He is the one who is loved by the women who sing the praises of the returning victors. As the king is the bridegroom of the people, Saul is right to recognise the power of David as the one who is loved. A question to consider.

Part of the tragedy of the story of Saul is how his way of seeing situations is so consistently jaundiced by fear, envy and paranoia, even when potential blessings are staring him right in the face. If you were to describe the way that Saul's character soured from when he was first called, how would you do so? What lessons can we learn from Saul's character development? 2 Corinthians 12 1-13 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth, but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

I have been a fool, you forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you, for I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works, for in what were you less favoured than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul continues his fool's speech, in which he has adopted a persona in order to beat the so-called super-apostles at their own game.

Throughout, he has made sure to hold this persona at arm's length, ensuring that the Corinthians recognise that he isn't speaking as himself at this point. While engaging in boasting as a fool, Paul has cleverly subverted the boasting of the super-apostles, boasting about the greater sufferings and indignities he has suffered for Christ, things

that wouldn't be a cause of boasting for almost anyone else. He has shown that he can best the super-apostles in cause for boasting, while also showing that their supposed grounds for boasting are not the true grounds for boasting at all.

Now he takes this further, to a dangerous point, where he might risk tipping over into actual boasting, as it is harder to establish a clear distance between himself and his fool's speech at this juncture. While Paul is showing that the grounds of the super-apostles' boasting is illegitimate, he is also showing that, if he were a fool, he could outmatch them in such boasting. Paul doesn't avoid such boasting out of fear of losing, but because the boasting is incompatible with Christ.

Having listed a great number of hardships, Paul moves to speak of astonishing degrees of revelation. The super-apostles might boast of their visions, but Paul's visions and revelations greatly exceed theirs. Speaking of these visions more directly in his fool's speech would be unfitting, and would easily seem like actual boasting.

So Paul chooses to relate the vision that he received in the third person, speaking of a man in Christ, while clearly relating his own personal experiences. This actually happened to Paul, and was a clear sign of the great blessing that he received, one that was manifestly far greater than that enjoyed by others. He needs to speak of this with great trepidation though, because whether or not he intended it as a boast, it would have the same effect, and would undermine the critique of boasting that he is advancing here.

Paul doesn't go into details about the experience. He casts a veil over much of it. He speaks of himself in the third person.

He doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of it, and he heard things that can't be told. Paul is mostly intentionally tipping his hand here, to reveal cards that he would never actually play, encouraging all of his opponents to fold. He has presumably revealed nothing of this event to the Corinthians prior to this time.

This would have strengthened Paul's point that such boasting was incompatible with faithful Christian service. In all of his time of knowing them, he hadn't mentioned this remarkable vision, precisely because such a vision could only properly be received by a profoundly humble person. We should probably recall Numbers chapter 12 verses 1-8 here, where Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses, insinuating that Moses' prominence as the prophetic leader of the Israelites was ego-driven.

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman, and they said, Has he not spoken through us also? And the Lord heard it. Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, Come out you three to the tent of meeting.

And the three of them came out. And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Moses was the one to whom God revealed himself most fully. He was the faithful and most trusted servant. Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him and the intimacy that he enjoyed with the Lord.

Extensive revelation, power or authority are huge liabilities and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation. If he was not the meekest man in the earth, he would not be suited to have the greatest degree of revelation in the earth.

If, for a moment, Moses had thought that the exceptional degree of revelation he had received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride. It was because Moses was the meekest of all men that the Lord could reveal himself so fully to him without puffing him up. Paul doesn't actually express this vision in the form of a boast.

He just relates the story as one that he would be able to make a boast about, should he want to do so. Yet, after tipping his hand, he doesn't play any card. Rather, he puts the cards he has been playing with in his fool's speech down and starts to dismantle the logic of the boasting.

He concludes verse 6 by declaring that he refrains from such boasting altogether. He doesn't build his apostolic credentials upon the basis of special revelations and visions, but upon things that the Corinthians had seen in him and heard from him. From his astonishing heavenly vision, Paul moves to speak of a thorn in the flesh that the Lord had given to him to ensure that he didn't become conceited.

This was given by God, but is also described as a messenger of Satan designed to harass him. There has been much speculation concerning the character of this thorn in the flesh. What exactly is it? The word thorn might refer to a stake upon which someone might become impaled on a battlefield.

It seems to be a stratagem designed by Satan to undermine Paul's ministry. It is both a messenger of Satan, but also something that God permits and wills Paul to suffer in his gracious providence. Like Job in the Old Testament, Paul is someone that Satan has his eye on and whom he wishes to destroy.



By allowing Paul to undergo the testing of Satan, God proves the effectiveness of his work in him. It is probably best not to engage in too much speculation about what this thorn might have been. Some have suggested loss of eyesight, others epilepsy, others severe headaches or something like that.

We should assume that it was some affliction rather than a sinful temptation. A sinful temptation would undermine Paul's point here. Rather, it is likely similar to the things that Job suffered in Satan's attack upon his body.

External hardships and afflictions hadn't done the trick with Paul for Satan, as they had also failed with Job, so Satan struck closer to home. The actual thing that was the thorn in the flesh isn't the real point. The issue is what Paul learned through it.

While the super-apostles seemed to have emphasised their victories, their revelations, their strengths and their riches, Paul had discovered God's grace and power in the place of his greatest weakness and suffering. At that point, God was fashioning him to be a fitting bearer of his power by emptying him of all of his own. He prayed three times for the removal of the thorn in the flesh.

We should probably remember Christ's own threefold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup would pass from him before surrendering himself to the Father's will. Paul is probably conscious of this parallel. He is sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Paul has learned contentment in the sufficiency of God in his weakness. God's grace is enough. And this is all for the sake of Christ, in whose sufferings he is ultimately sharing.

Paul wraps up his fool's discourse. The Corinthians should have known that Paul was the genuine article. He shouldn't have needed to play the part of the fool to show the Corinthians that he has the marks of a true apostle, and that he is by no means less than the supposed super-apostles.

The fruits of his genuine ministry were amply manifested among them, and even in them. They themselves were epistles of Christ, ministered by Paul and his associates. He had patiently proved himself to them in his ministry among them.

Nor had Paul treated the Corinthians any less than any other church. The one exception to this is what they have come to imagine as a wrong done to them in his not taking support from them. Paul's response to this at the end of verse 13 is suitably sarcastic.

A question to consider. Paul presents his thorn in the flesh as the necessary companion to the wonderful revelations that he received. What are some other biblical examples of God humbling people in order that they might be more powerfully used by him?