

Sermon 23: 1 Samuel 22: When the wicked prosper

OUTLINE

The provision of the cave
The killing of the priests
The praise of the persecuted

INTRODUCTION

Why do the wicked prosper? This is a question that has confounded the people of God since the devil overcame our first parents in the garden. If God is so caring why are His people that he claims to love so hard pressed? If God is so just why does He not suddenly come and judge the wicked? If God is so powerful why do His people have to continue in persecution? We can jump almost anywhere into the storyline of the bible and find this scenario. Think of Joseph, Israel in Egypt, Israel under the Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. Think of the many persecutions against Christianity through the ages and the modern attacks of Islam and postmodern secularism. The chapter before us is another typical scene from this story. Saul, the man without the spirit who is being driven by demonic forces is irrationally pursuing God's anointed. Those who serve in the presence of God are unjustly slaughtered at the hand of unbelievers. The people of God are oppressed, but God is graciously providing and strengthening His people, and His sovereignty is overruling even when evil seems to be prospering. This chapter does not answer every problem but does deal with some of the central concerns of it.

In this chapter we will see David spiritually restored and provided for yet all the while evil is apparently prospering. We want to look at how God provides for David, how God is still sovereign when evil prospers and psalm 52 which David wrote in response to this chapter.

The provision of the cave

Adullam's cave is proverbial. It can be a proverb that describes something bad. For example when you get a new church in town and all the fringe lunatics go there because every other church won't have them, this can be called an Adullam's cave. This is because everyone there is 'bitter in soul' v2. But Adullam's cave in truth is actually a good thing in David's life. David has just had a severe backslide in faith, he buckled under the pain of his situation defaulted to sinful ways, sinful evaluations and desperate measures. However, when David called out to God, God heard him and David's faith, because of God's grace was restored. Adullam's cave was the place where David had his faith and love for God restored, and I can immediately think of at least 5 psalms that were written while David was in Adullam's cave, 34, 52, 56, 57, and 142. In other words, this was a very fruitful time spiritually being a time of restoration after a backslide. So in the first place the cave is the place God provided restoring grace and spiritual refreshing, a time of prayer and praise and meditation and faith. Have you ever known God's grace in this way?

God's next provision is people, in verses 1-3 we see that David's family, and those in distress, debt and discontent gathered to him and he became captain over them. This is God's provision in two ways. Firstly, David was lonely and needed people around him. One of the worst things for depression is isolation. David is happily forced into cramped quarters with others. Some of the caves in that area are as large as basketball courts. Secondly, David is given opportunity to continue to serve in ways that he will serve on a larger scale later. Think of Joseph managing affairs in Potiphar's house and in prison before managing

affairs in Egypt. David is given a little army and flock to lead before he will lead the nation. Our sufferings often include these preparations for future service. God's sovereignty in our sufferings makes a way for these bad situations work for good.

Next we see God's provision for David's family, v3-4, 'And David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and my mother stay with you, till I know what God will do for me." 4 And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.' David recognised that his aging parents and other family members would not be suited to travel with a small army. An army needs to respond to need, to retreat, to march through the night. David is provided for by his own Moabite heritage. Remember now that David's ancestor is Ruth from Moab. There is a racial connection and provision sown into his family history 100 years before he is born that he can now turn to for help. We can see from David's words that this move is not due to a lack of faith because he speaks about waiting on God. Once again something we could never plan yet perfectly useful because we have a God who is eternal and sovereign.

But most importantly we see that God provides a prophet, v5, 'Then the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not remain in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah." So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth.' David is no longer making up his own ways and going to places like Gath for safety, he is waiting on God's direction that he might walk in God's path. He is no longer valuing things like Goliath's sword but trusts in God. David gets a prophet but we have something better we have the bible. God has not left us without a compass or a light for our path. God provides instruction, correction, promise, comfort, and all we need for every good work. We may suffer for reasons unknown to us, we may appear to be chased and harassed, but God has given us His word. This is a sign of blessing for no prophecy is a sign of God's absence.

Do God's people suffer? Yes! Does this mean that God is not gracious or not sovereign? No!

The killing of the priests

We turn now to the wicked who are raging and we see Saul, self-deceived; influenced by demons in the grip of suspicion and hate recklessly heaping judgement upon judgement upon himself. In v6 we see him on a mission to hunt David and he announces how no one is on his side and how even his own son is against him. Look at v8, 'that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.'" He is a typical case of a self-deceiver. The heart is deceitful above all things and the judgement of God is to be handed over to our hearts, this is very evident with Saul. Then in comes Doeg, that person we caught a quick snap shot of in 1 Sam. 21:7. V9-10, 'Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, 10 and he inquired of the LORD for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.'" He is only too happy to feed Saul's delusions to satisfy his own hatred.

Saul calls for Ahimelech and his whole family to appear before him. He accuses him of conspiring with David. Ahimelech's answer should create reasonable doubt, but this does not satisfy a heart in the grip of sinful prejudice. Saul orders his own guards to slay the priests of God, the Lord's anointed, but they will not. So Edom, a foreigner, the liar who conspired against them volunteers and not only kills Ahimelech but the whole town of Nob.

How can this happen, where is God in this injustice? These are the sorts of questions that arise at times like these. There are three things we can point out. Firstly, this episode is merely another episode in the war of the ages. It was something prophesied in the Garden of Eden, is not surprise to God and will all end in the victory of Christ. The seed of the woman, the godly line of believers will always be persecuted by the seed of the serpent, the unbelievers. It is not a new victory that satan is winning in this chapter but another futile attempt to try and overcome the good and fail. It may have felt to those on the ground that the tide had turned and that it looked like evil would conquer, but Christ will overcome. The way of the cross was sketched in shadows and types in the lives of the prophets priests and kings of the OT and fulfilled by Christ, they are the same path that all saints walk to heaven.

But there is another aspect we need to remember. In 1 Sam. 21 Eli was given a prophecy by young Samuel, v33, 'The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men.' You will remember that the bad priests Eli, and his sons Hophni and Phineas provoked the wrath of God and a prophecy was uttered. Eli's line was not the correct son of Aaron to be holding the highpriesthood and this needed correcting. There were sins in this line which must be punished. What is important to note is that although it appears that evil is prospering God is fulfilling His own prophesied purposes. In other words a situation that looks like the victory of evil is in fact enacting the prophesied purposes of God. We are not told whether these priests were wicked and needed judgement, we are not told whether they were innocent saints faithful to God and granted a martyrs death and reward. But what we can know is that this is not random, this is not out of control, this is deliberate and under the providence of God. This reminds me of those verses in Acts 2:23, 'this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.' 4:27-28 when the apostles are praying, 'for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.' You will notice that God's preplanned will includes the acts of wicked men, not because God is the author of evil but to show that the sinners freely sinned yet God's purposes are triumphant over them all.

The third encouragement we see when wickedness rages is that God preserves a remnant in Abiathar, v20, 'But one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David.' Is this not typical of God's ways to victory. When Pharaoh sought to kill all the Israelite boys God saved Moses which led them to deliverance. When Herod sought to kill all contenders for the throne Jesus is saved. When the devil seeks to wipe out people God does not allow His people to be completely overrun.

The praise of the persecuted

What would your response have been to such an event? You make one little mistake and a vicious genocidal attack takes place of such wickedness you are left reeling. We get to hear David's response as he writes psalm 52.

You will notice in the historical inscription on this psalm that it is specifically about Doeg. It is a short psalm with a simple 3 part structure. Verses 1-4 describe Doeg in his sin. Verses 5-7 apply the truths of God's justice to the situation. And verses 8-9 describe David's posture of patient praise and trust in the face of this wickedness.

What is important to note in all three sections are the statements of faith in the face of such viciousness. The opening description focuses on the the mouth of Doeg as it mentions his boasting, his tongue, deceit, lying, words that devour and characterising him as a deceitful tongue. It must not be lost on us that this whole incident was caused by words. Saul was provoked to jealousy by words, and now Doeg stokes the fires of Saul's suspicions and moves him to order murder by words. We are reminded of the power of the tongue and how we as the church will often be attacked by slander, misrepresentation, lies, and this will result in legal actions, prejudice, public disgrace and many other things for the same of Christ. Notice the faith statement in verse, 'the steadfast love of the Lord endures all the day.' Why boast, why speak, why make any attempt to plot if this is the case. Here David is stating his position. He knows that no matter who hates, speaks and acts against him, God is for him, so who can truly be against him, what can flesh do to him.

Verses 5-7 stress God's certain judgement. David does not question it here he is certain, and this is how he comforts himself in the face of this atrocity. God will judge. Notice the violent actions of break, snatch, tear, uproot, it is all very catastrophic and final. We even see that the righteous will see this justice and this will result in further praise to God. But we also see that the righteous will laugh. This is not stating that we will enjoy the punishment and be deriding, no it is a case of rejoicing in justice.

The final two verses present a picture of peace and hope and praise that seems out of step with the violent scene and catastrophe of 1 Sam. 22. David is aware of the war going on around him but he sees himself as a green olive tree. This is a hardy tree suited for dry conditions, here David presents it as healthy. But this is a green olive tree in God's house. This reminds us of Aaron's staff which budded in God's presence, and being in God's house speaks of intimacy and protecting presence.

David speaks of his faith as he says he trusts in God's covenant love and does not doubt it, this is a strong statement given what David is facing.

David will give thanks for justice accomplished and speaks of it in the past tense.

David speaks about patient waiting not wondering if God will do it, but simply waiting until He will do it.

David will wait and take comfort from the like minded saints with him.

David realises as we must that evil only apparently prospers, God is in control, God does love us, God does provide for His people and we can wait in trust and peace.