

Closing the loop

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[0:00] I've commented on, but we have to think in terms of wisdom, I think.! Well, the proverb says, by wisdom kings reign, and rulers make laws that are just.

! Or in Saul's case, perhaps not. Here's something to think about. You can hardly turn on the news without it becoming clear that the West is in trouble, as Jerome has already mentioned.

There's conflict everywhere. Perhaps a look at the life of King Saul will help us to make sense of it. So here's something to start us thinking. Suppose you were to try and sum up Paul's life in just a few words, maybe as an epitaph or something like that.

How might you describe Saul's life? You might go for these words, which are actually written about Charles II. But it was written by John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester.

He wrote these words. Here lies our sovereign Lord the King, whose word no man relies on. He never says a foolish thing, nor ever does a wise one.

[1:16] So that was written about Charles II, but it kind of fits the word of Saul. But when I thought about it a bit more, I thought I might actually go for something simpler.

If I was going to sum up the life of Saul. Perhaps we could just say of everything that Saul did, it seemed like a good idea at the time. In fact, Saul's whole life reads like an illustration of the law of unintended consequences, doesn't it?

That actions we take have all sorts of consequences that we don't expect. And again and again, Saul acts without thinking things through properly.

And the result is rarely good. We all know the text, don't we, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

But fools despise wisdom and discipline. Sometimes, however, that little word beginning is often forgotten. And therefore the second part of the verse is ignored.

[2:26] Sometimes Christianity is presented as just ask, don't ask questions, just believe. But I defy you to find any verse in which Jesus or any prophet or apostle says any such thing.

On many occasions, Jesus criticised his disciples' lack of faith. But it was always on the grounds that they didn't understand.

Faith, as the Bible presents it, is always understand and therefore believe. Another passage in Proverbs, Proverbs 2, 1-5.

I'm going to be quoting Proverbs a lot today, you'll find. Proverbs 2, 1-5 says, My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, if you look for it as for silver and search for it as hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

We have to search for wisdom, it doesn't just happen. Of course we need to add to that that we won't understand everything.

[3:53] That's why we have the book of Job. God's thoughts are always above ours. Fools think they know everything, but the wise understand that there is much they don't understand.

And as we come to look at the life of Saul, it's a bit of subtlety is required, I think. Because Saul doesn't exactly reject God. Even in our present passage here, he's actually desperate for some divine word, isn't he?

He's had many words from the Lord already, yet it seems he's failed to understand any of them. Couple that with the tendency to act first and regret it later, and the result is tragedy normally. A constant theme in all the wisdom literature, from Job to the Sermon on the Mount, is to think before you speak or act. Words and actions have consequences.

Something that is appropriate at one time in context might actually be very inappropriate at another time in context. Timing and context matter. Here's one of my favourite verses from Proverbs 27.14.

[5:17] If a man loudly blesses his neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse. Those of you who are mourning people, please note.

What are the Beatitudes in chapter 5?

I'm not going to read them, because I'm sure most people here are very familiar with them. But they're blessings that come from seeing the big picture, looking behind the most obvious, and trying to understand the way the world really works.

I don't know whether you're a fan of Shakespeare, but something Shakespeare was very good at, was writing tragedy. In particular, there are two famous Shakespeare plays, Macbeth and King Lear, both of which the story has the inevitability of tragedy, as the king's paranoia and selfishness in both cases lead to inevitable disaster.

You're only sort of two scenes in the plays before you realise it's all going to go horribly wrong. And that's exactly what happens. And this is in the life of Saul, we see the whole process acted out in real history.

[6:37] And in our passage here, the author emphasises the point by laying on the irony really thickly. Saul's worst enemy isn't David, or the Philistines, or the Amalekites.

Saul's worst enemy is himself. Self-obsession and increasing paranoia lead to the unravelling of his reign.

So as we come to these closing chapters in 1 Samuel, and we've got, of course, the stories of David and Saul interwoven in these closing chapters.

But as we come to the end of 1 Samuel, Anota closes the loop on Saul's life. The final word is in chapter 30, verse 13, where we find that Saul's reign ends where it began, at Jabesh Gilead.

You remember his first act as a king was to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead and lift the siege of the Amalekites.

[8:02] Ammon, I think it was. In Jabesh Gilead, Saul's first, and indeed most of the Sassfil act, was to lift the siege of that city.

And all that Jabesh Gilead can do to pay back that debt, we find at the end, is to retrieve his body from the Philistines. But in a sense, that's just tidying up the loose end.

It's really in this chapter that the author of the book really traces the tragic trajectory of Saul's kingship. So let's just mull over that for a bit.

So what are we told? We're told that Samuel is dead. Right back at the start, Samuel had anointed Saul and told him, the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power and you will prophesy with them and you will be changed into a different person.

Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you. But then he adds a warning, go down ahead of me to Gilgal.

[9:15] I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. But you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.

That's chapter 10, verses 6 to 8. Samuel was quite clear that God would be with Saul as long as Saul listened to the words of the Lord, particularly as provided by Samuel.

He was not to rely on his own understanding, but rather on the wisdom that comes from the fear of the Lord. And Saul started off okay, as I've said, defeating the Ammonites at Jabesh Gilead in chapter 11.

But then war with the Philistines broke out and things started to get sticky. We read of this in chapter 13. Saul's troops were deserting and Samuel seemed late for their rendezvous.

And so Saul did exactly what Samuel had specifically told him not to do. He made the Thanksgiving sacrifice. That wasn't his job.

[10:26] That was Samuel's job. But Saul ignored what Samuel had said. He thought he knew best. And it was from that point that Saul's reign began to unravel.

The next mistake was a foolish curse that Saul made without thinking it through.

In chapter 14. The men of Israel were in distress that day because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, for I have avenged myself or my enemies.

So none of the troops tasted food. A foolish oath. They needed their strength for the battle. And in fact, it nearly resulted in Jonathan's death because Jonathan hadn't heard about this and took some honey to eat.

And Saul would have had his own son put to death except the men of Israel rescued him. Again, he acted foolishly without thinking it through.

[11:45] In chapter 15, Saul again disobeys God's word through Samuel over the Amalekite plunder. In this case, there's a long argument if you read the whole chapter between Saul and Samuel.

But I won't read the whole thing. Let me just read the end of it. Samuel proclaims, Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king. Just read that last verse again. For rebellion is like the sin of divination.

Notice that, the sin of divination. Arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.

[12:54] And from then on, Samuel will have nothing to do with Saul. The end of that chapter we read, until the day Samuel died, he didn't go to see Saul again, although Samuel mourned for him.

And the Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel. So in chapter 28, Samuel is dead.

But in fact, before the narrator tells us this, we have this long drawn out tale of David and Saul. Once again, it starts well. With David playing his harp to soothe Saul's mental torment.

And then destroying the Philistine giant, Goliath. David is promoted to army commander. But what happens? Saul becomes consumed with jealousy.

When the Israelites sing, Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands. It's chapter 18, verse 7. So the result of this, in spite of all the evidence of David's loyalty, Saul is convinced that David is out to depose him.

[14:11] And repeatedly, as we've gone through the book, we've seen he tries to kill David throws a spear at him, tries to ambush him. Repeatedly, we've seen David refuses to strike back.

He won't lift a hand against the Lord's anointed. But while David's sword is restrained, the same cannot be said for Saul. Jealousy and paranoia make him irrational and inconsistent.

Sometimes he admits his own folly. In chapter 24, one of these incidents when David says, I could have killed you but I didn't.

Saul says, you're more righteous than I. You have treated me well but I have treated you badly. It's the hope for Saul there but no, it turns out not.

Mostly, Saul is consumed by violence and anger. David realizes he can't even rely on that word. That's why he flees in the end to Philistia.

[15:21] Saul's his own worst enemy. Chapter 22, the Israelites tried to restrain Saul from murdering the priests of Nob. But the Israelites themselves were not prepared to kill the priests of the Lord so he has to call on an Edomite to do the dirty work.

And what's the result of this rash act? Abiathar flees to David with the ephod. If you remember, the ephod was a robe used by the priests to discern God's will.

Saul had rejected Samuel and now he's rejected the priests. Another legitimate channel of God's word.

And the spirit has left Saul and Samuel is gone and now Saul has turned the priests against him as well. Saul has no access to the words of the Lord.

His rebellion and paranoia and jealousy have taken him down a dark path. And so we arrive at chapter 28.

[16:41] Saul spent most of his life fighting the Philistines, hasn't he? But now he's terrified, verse 5. Having repeatedly rejected the word of the Lord, he's now desperate to hear it.

But he gets no answer. Verse 6. Saul inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. The spirit wouldn't come to him.

Urim, which appears to be some sort of way of lots as far as we know, would not answer him. And he had driven away the prophets.

The spirit, the priests and the prophets had been driven away and Saul had no access to the words of the Lord. Saul does not know where to turn.

Samuel is dead. David appears to have defected to the enemy and presumably they'd taken Abiathel, the last remaining priest, with him.

[17:47] so what does he do? He holds a seance. Surely this is the ultimate foolishness.

Saul turns to a medium. Of course, this was explicitly forbidden in the Mosaic Law. Leviticus 20 verse 27 says, a man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them. Their blood will be on their own heads. Saul was well aware of this. In fact, he enforced the law himself, as we see in verse 3.

and yet his fear and his paranoia drive him on to destruction. If he can find no legitimate way of finding the word of the Lord, he's going to take up necromancy.

And a medium is found. There's one living in Endor, apparently. I don't know where Endor is, but obviously not too far away from where Saul was.

[19:14] And apparently this found. A medium is found, one who had apparently given up the practice rather than submit to exile.

But she knows what to do. Irony upon irony. Absolute contradiction to the words of the Lord.

Saul swears to the Lord, by the Lord, that she won't be harmed for doing something that was specifically forbidden in the law. And so the woman proceeds with the séance.

And apparently she seems to be rather surprised by her own success. Perhaps she was just a faker before, but this time at least something appears. And indeed it appears that she really has raised the spirit of Samuel.

Is this going to bring Saul the word that he wants? Well, of course not. Having ignored the counsel of Samuel when he was alive, Saul is now reduced to consulting a ghost.

[20:49] But it doesn't help. Dead Samuel is only one thing to add to what he pronounced when alive. Let's just read these words of Samuel again from the passage.

Samuel said, Why do you consult me now that the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me.

The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors, to David.

Why would he expect dead Samuel will have anything more to say than he said when he was alive?

But he does have one thing to add. The Lord will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines and tomorrow you and your sons will be with you. The Lord will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines.

Tomorrow Saul and his sons, even the innocent Jonathan, will die. The army will be defeated.

Saul's folly will affect the whole of Israel.

[22:10] Saul's reign is ended and he has no one to blame but himself.

Striking that even the medium who he tricked remains loyal and has actually moved to compassion in verse 24.

But all they can do now is give Saul something to eat, to give him the strength to meet his fate. Saul had advocated fasting before a battle but his servants say no you have to eat.

But there's nothing he can do, they can do other than just give him the strength to meet the battle and meet his own death. Saul is destroyed by his own obsession.

The end of the matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:8. So what are we to make of all this?

[23:29] What are we to learn from it? The narrator is not just recounting all this stuff to impress us with his skills as a historian and dramatist, although he certainly has such skills.

But he wants us to learn from this tale. The narrative of Samuel, David and Saul are intertwined, inviting us to contrast their decisions and actions.

History is written by the victor, of course, yet even this book is not written by some royal spin doctor bigging up David, is it? David is criticized and David's mistakes are shown as well.

None of the main characters are above criticism. Starts right back at the beginning with the rivals of the Samuel's mother and her rival, and then Eli, and none of the characters in this tale are above criticism, not even David or Samuel.

Samuel. And yet there is a difference. In the last analysis, Samuel and David are faithful to the word of the Lord, whereas Saul is not.

[24:49] What went wrong? What mistakes do we need to learn from and thus avoid? And as we've said, this was written thousands of years ago, and yet it seems so relevant to our Western society today, which is in such chaos.

It seems to be making just the same mistakes as Saul made. So let's just reiterate some of these mistakes, just to get it clear in our mind and what to know, what to avoid.

I say the first thing is the law of unintended consequences, the ability of governments to make decisions without realising what's going to happen.

Too often Saul reacted without actually thinking. Saul could see an immediate need, for instance, when his troops were deserting, but he failed to consider the consequences of his speech and actions.

He made a rash vow forbidding his soldiers to eat during the battle, which nearly cost the life of his son, Jonathan. He spoke without thinking, acted without thinking.

[26:15] He executed the priests and cut himself off from access to their council. He even went into a cave once without checking whether it was safe while he was on a manhunt and nearly got himself killed.

It's only because David refused to strike that he wasn't killed then. Actions have unforeseen consequences. As I say, there's much that the book of Proverbs has to teach us about this. Proverbs reminds us of the need to think before we act. Chapter 29, verse 11 says, A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.

In verse 20 of that chapter, Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Don't those words fit Saul exactly?

More to the point, how often do they fit us also? The second mistake that Saul made was his self-obsession which led him to assume that he knows what is best.

[27:45] We don't quite know why this happened. Perhaps it was what is known as imposter syndrome. They thought that he wasn't quite up to the job. Might have been that. Or perhaps he really did think it was all about him and he was the only one who mattered.

We don't know whatever the truth is, but the result was clear, jealousy and paranoia. Occasionally he even claimed that credit for the actions of Jonathan.

when it came to David, Saul was completely obsessional. Chapter 18 verse 15 says, when Saul saw how successful David was, he was afraid of him.

Why? There was no logic to that fear. David had rescued the Israelites from the hand of Goliath. David had helped Saul with his mental struggles and played the harp for him.

There was repeated evidence of David's loyalty and yet Saul is convinced that David is out to get him and supplant him. There is even a certain irony here because actually the narrator tells us that Saul was a good soldier, was a valiant soldier.

[29:06] Chapter 14 verses 47 to 48 says, after Saul had assumed rule over Israel, he fought against their enemies on every side, Moab, the Ammonites, Edom, the kings of Zobab, and the Philistines.

Wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment on them. He fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them. It wasn't even a matter that Saul wasn't actually up to the job. He wasn't a bad king by any means. In many ways, he wasn't even a bad person. And yet, he was destroyed by this jealousy and paranoia.

His fear of David would consume him until the end, and then his whole world unravels. But why did this happen? I think the basic answer we've already touched on, but let's just say it again.

Saul knew God's word, but he didn't do it. Saul was no atheist. He wasn't even an idolater in the literal sense of the term, though his arrogance made him an idolater in the figurative sense, because he came to worship himself, but in the literal sense, he didn't commit idolatry.

[30:32] He maintained lip service to the word of the Lord, but what he saw was endorsement and encouragement from the Lord. It was endorsement of his own decisions, not guidance from the Lord's word.

Repeatedly, Saul wanted Samuel to endorse what he'd already decided was right. If you think back to the story, when Saul made the sacrifice when he shouldn't have done, he argued with Samuel and said, this seemed to be the best thing, I want the Lord's endorsement for this, I was looking for the Lord's blessing.

Same with the issue of the Amalekites when he saved the Amalekite king. There's a long argument about this, Saul and Samuel have a long debate about it.

But Saul was not prepared to listen to what God had actually said. He wanted God's endorsement for his own decisions. He wanted Samuel's support for his own decisions.

He's always full of excuses and self-justification. And when Samuel refused to accept these excuses, Saul chose to ignore him.

[31:54] He did not submit to the word of God, instead he usurped it to his own purposes. How often does this happen?

Throughout church history, teachers have twisted the teaching of Jesus and the apostles to suit their own way of thinking. quite often claiming the leading of the Spirit is justification in doing it. Peter warns us of such people, doesn't he? Referring to Paul's letters, he says he writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters.

His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other scriptures, to their own destruction.

Merely reading the scriptures is not going to help you very much if you don't do what they say, you don't actually listen and understand. Peter goes on, therefore dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard, so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men, and fall from your secure position.

[33:08] if we make this mistake, and throughout history the church has made this mistake, and nations have made this mistake, and the result at best is error, and at worst murder.

There are famous examples in the death of Hypatia, or the Spanish Inquisition. the old joke, you never expect the Spanish Inquisition, but these are carried out in the name of the Lord, in the name of Christianity, and yet they were totally contrary to the words of what Jesus had told us to do.

We can bring this up to date, think of what some of the liberal churches have done today, imposing their own worldview on marriage, and sexuality, and gender identity, and claiming the leading of the Spirit for doing it.

We need to think before we speak, but of course it matters also what we think. We mustn't forget that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

David thought before he went to Gath in 17.1, but as we saw next week, that may not have been the wisest decision in his case.

[34:44] He would need a providence of God to keep him from the consequence of that thinking. It's not just thinking that we need, it's thinking and understanding what the word of God really says, and that's as relevant now as it was two and a half thousand years ago.

You've only got to look around and see the chaos around us to see that. And of course we need to make sure we don't do it ourselves. So easy to do, isn't it?

We have something that we think is a good idea, but is it really in accordance with what God wants? We're having good ideas, of course, we need all the good ideas we can get, but they need to be ones that come from the word of the Lord, not made up of our own understanding.

So in fact, what we really need is a wise king. That king is not Saul. David did better, but ultimately that king is not even David.

but of the true servant king, Jesus, Isaiah writes, see my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

[36:12] Jesus teaches us to see things as they really are. The Proverbs seem to be in demand at the moment, the book of Proverbs.

We're thinking of doing it in the study group next term. seem to be a popular choice. Why is that? I think it's because there seems to be a remarkable understanding of the lack of wisdom is around at the moment.

We really need wisdom. Jesus is the servant king who acts wisely. People argue about wisdom in the book of Proverbs because wisdom is of course given a persona and it's a female persona. but some commentators think in spite of that these words actually represent the words of the son himself, the words of Jesus.

I think I would agree with that although as I say wisdom does have a female persona in Proverbs. And yet those words that wisdom says were written thousands of years ago but it could hardly be more opposite in 21st century Britain.

[37:24] I'm going to read a slightly longer passage from Proverbs if you want to turn to it. It's Proverbs chapter 1 verses 20 to 33.

As I say it's hardly difficult to imagine anything more relevant to our nation and our society at the beginning of the 21st century.

Proverbs chapter 1 starting at verse 20. Wisdom calls aloud in the street. She raises her voices in the public squares.

At the head of the noisy streets she cries out. Noisy streets where people aren't really listening but she cries out anyway. In the gateways of the city she makes her speech.

How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? you.

[38:34] If you have answered my rebuke and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and will not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster.

I will mock when calamity overtakes you, when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

Then they will call to me but I will not answer. They will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurn my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes for the waywardness of the simple will kill them and the complacency of fools will destroy them.

But whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm. I asked at the beginning a few words that would sum up the life of Saul.

That's rather more words but surely it sums up the life of Saul so well. What does wisdom say? It says, I will laugh at your disaster, I will mock when calamity overtakes you.

[40:10] There is a certain dark humour isn't there in the narration of this chapter? The irony is laid on and yet it's still a great tragedy. Verse 28 of that passage, they will call to me but I will not answer.

I suppose in this case actually God did answer but not with the answer that Saul wanted. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurn my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

The waveness of the simple will kill them, the complacency of fools will destroy them. But whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm.

The penalty for ignoring wisdom's call is severe. And as wisdom makes clear, you've got no one to blame but yourself. hope. But still there is hope.

What Saul didn't do was repent. Instead of repenting, he did something else which he knew was contrary to God's will and God's word. Perhaps if he'd repented, perhaps there might have been a

different outcome, but he didn't.

[41:36] But there is a king who acts wisely, the servant king Jesus. And he has that power to change heart and mind, so there is hope.

So we close our service today by singing of that. If we listen to him, our hope is only in Jesus.
Amen.