

God is always working good

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[0:00] One of the strangest things about these stories with Saul and with Israel asking for a king in chapters 8-15 of 1 Samuel, is that they aren't the end of the whole story.

If you've still got your Bible open from the scripture reading, have a look at how much there is left. The things that go on in these chapters are horrible and have the potential to be an absolute boat anchor on the future of God's people.

And at many given points throughout these chapters, it should actually just be the end of the whole story. And yet there's still so much more to come. If you just literally look at the physical Bible, there's pages and pages and pages left to come from where we're reading.

The things that Saul does, his blunders and rebellions, really could have sunk the whole ship.

Remember that he is the first king. Israel isn't a real nation yet.

They're in the land that God had promised to them, and it looks like they hold pockets of it here and there, but they're constantly skirmishing with other people to try to maintain some level of security and hold over the land.

[1:11] And yet their first king is an absolute mess, and it's amazing that they survive. Why isn't this the end of the story? And it isn't just Israel asking for a king, and it isn't just all the blunders and rebellions of Saul.

This is a pattern that fits across all of Scripture. We see Saul ignore God's command. He gets scared and gets worried. He avoids God's command. He alters God's commands.

And from this point onward in 1 Samuel, in many ways, he gets worse and worse, but it isn't the end. And like I said, this is familiar. At the very beginning, God creates humanity.

Adam and Eve are in the garden. It's perfect. It's beautiful. It's just what it should be. And yet they turn from God. Well, that should have been the end of the story, but it wasn't.

We come to the flood. The flood is God's reaction to the sin in judgment, but it's also a cleansing. That should have been the end of the story as well. Noah gets off the boat and falls into sin himself again.

[2:16] That should have been the end of the story. We come along finally to Abraham, but Abraham also goes wrong in some big ways. And so again, we have to ask, why isn't this the end of the story?

And Abraham's an important point to come to because we recognize then that everything that comes after Abraham is resting on a promise that God made to this man.

God said to Abraham, I will make your family into a nation. I will make that nation a blessing to the whole world. Everything is at stake in that promise.

That's what we need to have happen. We need Abraham's family to become a nation. We need that nation to become a blessing to the whole world. But no nation with Saul as its ruler is going to be a blessing.

No nation that Saul is leading is going to bless the world, to have the goodness of God go toward the ends of the earth. So why isn't this the end of the story?

[3:16] And how in the world is all of this going to come out? The key thing this morning is that our wickedness, our sin, is not the end.

Because God is always working good. The reason that our wickedness isn't the end of the story, at any of the points where it should have been the end of the story, is that God is always working good.

And this gives us great hope. As we do look at our lives, we do see evil. We see it in our own lives, the way that we have turned from God. We see it in our own lives and things that have been done

against us and to us.

We see it in our lives and those we know in the suffering of those who are already downtrodden. We see it in the world as people suffer all over. But our wickedness and our evil is never the end. Because God is always working good. The section we just read in 1 Samuel chapter 12 comes after Saul's one big victory. In 1 Samuel 11, like we looked at last week, the spirit of the Lord comes upon Saul and he leads Israel into this great victory.

[4 : 30] And so what's happening now in chapter 12 is Samuel is making this transition. He gives this big long transition speech to tell people what's going on, establishing Saul is the king after he's won this great victory.

So again, in chapter 12, starting in verse 6, Samuel said to the people, It's the Lord who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of Egypt. Now then stand here because I'm going to confront you with evidence before the Lord as to all the righteous acts performed by the Lord for you and your ancestors.

After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the Lord for help and the Lord sent Moses and Aaron who brought your ancestors out of Egypt and settled them in this place. Moses, or sorry, Samuel says, Remember what God did.

God found you in your suffering and brought you out. Evil wasn't the end of the story. God brought you out of Egypt through Moses and Aaron. And Samuel continues, But remember what you did? In verse 9, Samuel said, They forgot the Lord their God, so he sold them into the hand of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the king of Moab who fought against them.

[5 : 43] Remember how vulnerable they are at this point. It's not just that they've turned from God. They're just an extremely vulnerable people. They had been slaves. They're now migrants.

They don't have homes. They're not yet in the land. They don't possess a place. And they're under attack. And again, this should have been the end of the story. But Samuel says that wasn't the end of the story.

Remember what God did. In verse 10, he said, They cried to the Lord and said, We've sinned. We've forsaken the Lord. We have served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, but now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve you.

The Lord sent Jeroboam, Barak, Jephthah, and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around you so that you lived in safety. Again, God says, Samuel says, Remember what God did.

God delivered you. He brought you out. And then in that same pattern, he says, But remember what you did after. God worked this deliverance.

[6 : 43] And then what did you do after in verse 12? When you saw that Nahash, king of the Ammonites, was moving against you, you said to me, No, we want a king to rule over us, even though the Lord your God was your king.

Samuel says to them, What you're doing now in asking for this king that I'm establishing for you is exactly what the people before you did when they rejected me.

This again should be the end of the story. Samuel says to them, The whole reason you have this new king is because you've rejected your true king, and I'll prove it to you.

In verse 16, Samuel said, Stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest? Wheat harvest is in the dry season.

It never rains. I will call on the Lord to send thunder and rain, and you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the Lord when you asked for a king. Then Samuel called on the Lord, and that same day the Lord sent thunder and rain.

[7 : 47] So all the people stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel. The people all said to Samuel, Pray to the Lord your God for your servants that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king.

What a scene. If I said to you now, The Lord your God calls upon you to fall on your knees and repent, and he will prove it by this clap of thunder.

And then it happened. Think of the chills you would have. Some of you might have been worried it was actually going to happen right there, right? Samuel says, You have done this evil.

And again at this moment, this should be the end, right? The people are in the land. God has brought them in. He's delivered them. After they had fallen away from him and said, Please deliver

us.

God said, I will deliver you. I've chosen you as my people. They reject him again. It happens again and again. And this should be the end. And the people are honestly, apparently concerned that it is. [8 : 51] They're worried that this is the end. And Samuel says, Your wickedness, your turning from the Lord is not the end in this moment. He says to them, in verse 20, Do not be afraid.

Samuel replied, You have done all this evil. Yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols.

They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name, the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. Samuel does not say, Guys, no big deal. Calm down. This isn't that bad. It's all going to be fine.

Samuel says, Do not be afraid. And you have done this evil.

Both are true. And the reason that both are true, that they have done this great wickedness, and yet they can be told, Do not be afraid, is because God is determined to work good for them.

[9 : 57] Samuel explains how this works. This is a big deal, but it's not the end. He says, Come back and pursue the Lord. Do not turn to useless idols. Keep turning to God.

God isn't finished. It's not over. Turn back to the Lord again. Idols won't rescue you, but your God will. And for the sake of his great name, he will not reject his people, because he was pleased to make you his own.

You do not invite people to the table until the food is ready. Unless you know that there's going to be food there. Samuel calls them to the table.

He doesn't say, You have done this evil, and it's over. It's done. Forget it. Stop trying. He says, You have done this evil. Do not fear. Turn to the Lord.

This isn't over. God is determined to do good, and to work good for you. Samuel continues in verse 23, As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you.

[11 : 02] I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. Consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish.

Samuel says, Come back to the Lord. It isn't over. Yes, you have done this great evil, but do not fear. The Lord is determined to do you good.

He has chosen you as his people. For the sake of his great name, the Lord will not reject his people because the Lord was pleased to make you his own.

The way this works is God determined that he would create a world where his glory, his greatness, his beauty, his majesty would be apparent, where it would be visible, where it would become clear what he is really like, that he is wonderful, that he is sovereign, that he is good, and that he is gracious.

It isn't just in grace that God displays his glory, but there's something about grace that especially broadcasts his beauty. And in this, the Lord was pleased to make a people for himself.

[12 : 14] And he is determined to keep those that he claims. Samuel says to the people, You have done this evil, but do not fear, because God is determined to do good.

He is determined to show his glory. He is determined to show how wonderful and beautiful he is by being faithful to you, by allowing you to continue to return to him and to repent.

One of the greatest things scripture says to us is, Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in all the earth.

We need to recognize that God's will to do us good isn't based in us. It isn't that God looks to us and says, They're so wonderful, I can't help myself.

God's will to do us good is based in himself. His reason for continuing to work good is his unshakable desire to display his glory and how wonderful and how beautiful he is and so Samuel says to them, Yes, you've done this great evil, but do not fear.

[13 : 30] For the sake of his great name, the Lord will not reject his people. And one of the ways he will be exalted on this earth is by upholding astonishing levels of grace. It is not the end when Israel asks their true king for a new king because God is determined to work good.

And it is not the end when Saul falls again and again for the same reason. We'll turn now from Samuel's speech to remember Saul and what he has done.

In the next chapter, 1 Samuel 13, Saul is facing an enemy that is much greater than the army of Israel can handle. And so he gets nervous and he gets scared and he decides not to wait on the

Lord and he takes matters into his own hands and makes a mess.

When we come to chapter 14, if you want to turn over there, we find what it should have looked like. What should Saul have done when he was faced with this great army that he knew his forces had no real chance of defeating?

In chapter 14, we find his son, Jonathan. Jonathan is Saul, the king's son. And Jonathan does what Saul should have done. Chapter 14, starting in verse 6, looking across at this great army, Jonathan said to his young armor bearer, come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men.

[14:50] Perhaps the Lord will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few. That's what Saul forgot. Right? Saul was watching in chapter 13, his army melt away because they were scared.

And he should have said, the Lord doesn't need a big army to win this fight. The Lord just needs to be the Lord. His son, Jonathan, knows it and says, nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.

Jonathan goes with his armor bearer and attacks the enemy camp. And in verse 15, we find panic struck the whole army. Those in the camp and field and those in the outposts and raiding parties and the ground shook.

It was a panic sent by God. Jonathan was right. There was just two of them, Jonathan and his armor bearer, attacking this camp that had caused Israel so much worry and Saul so much fear and yet they're winning.

Because God doesn't need a big army to win. And God sent this earthquake. The ground shook. It was a panic sent by God. And where is Saul? Saul is watching it happen.

[15:58] Israel had come to Samuel and said, we need a king. We need someone who will lead us. Specifically, we want someone who will fight our battles for us. Well, here's the fight happening and Saul is not fighting the battle nor leading the people.

he's watching it from the other side of the hill. Chapter 14, verse 16. Saul's lookouts in Gibeah and Benjamin saw the army melting away in all directions.

And Saul said to the men who were with him, muster the forces and see who's left us. He looks out and sees this enemy encampment all fading away, melting into the countryside. And he's like, I didn't do this.

Who is doing this? So they pull everyone together and figure out that it's his son, Jonathan, and his armor bearer who had gone. So Saul said in verse 18 to Ahijah, bring the ark of God.

While Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the Philistine camp increased more and more and Saul said to the priest, withdraw your hand. What's going on here is Saul's trying to get it right.

[17:01] He sees this route happening, the enemy encampment melting away as they're being chased and so he calls for the ark of God so he can inquire and he can ask the Lord, should I join this?

Should I join the battle? Will you give victory if we go? But as he's doing this, as he's seeking an answer from the Lord, he keeps hearing the noise get louder and louder and he says, ah, forget it. Stop inquiring of the Lord. Let's just go. Saul is making a mess of this and he's going to make an even bigger mess. Saul and the rest of the army do join in the fight and there's a great victory at hand.

Verse 22 of chapter 14. When all the Israelites who had hidden in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were on the run, they joined in the battle in hot pursuit. So on that day the Lord saved Israel and the battle moved on beyond Beth-Avon.

Now the Israelites were in distress that day because Saul had bound the people under an oath saying, cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I've avenged myself on my enemies so none of his troops tasted food.

[18:09] Saul, remember, began inquiring of the Lord, should we go to this battle? He gets distracted by the noise and says, forget it, let's just go. And then as they go join the battle and they start to have this victory, he makes this foolish oath and says, no one's allowed to eat until all of our enemies are cut down before us.

And so what happens, of course, is that the army gets hungry and starts to fade in their energy.

Verse 22, sorry, verse 25, the entire army entered the woods and there was honey on the ground.

When they went into the woods, they saw the honey oozing out, yet no one put his hand to his mouth because they feared the oath because Saul had said, no one is to touch food until the battle

is done.

But Jonathan, Saul's son, had not heard that his father had found the people with this oath, so he reached out the end of the staff that was in his hand, dipped it in the honeycomb and he raised his hand to his mouth and his eyes brightened.

One of his soldiers told him, your father bound the army under a strict oath saying, curse it be anyone who eats food today. That is why the men are faint. Jonathan said, my father has made trouble for the country, which should be the subtitle of Saul's biography.

[19 : 24] See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey, how much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been greater?

That day after the Israelites had struck down the Philistines from Michmash to Aijalon, they were exhausted. So now we've got this big problem. First you have Israel, who was winning this great victory.

Remember, they just hold little pockets of land. They don't have real security, but they're on their way to getting it. But they can't win fully because they're just hungry. They've been fighting and they're not allowed to eat.

We have a bigger problem because Jonathan has eaten, so the person who won this victory is going to have to be killed because of this oath. But before we solve that problem, we have yet another problem.

Chapter 14, verse 32, said that the Israelites, the army, pounced on the plunder, taking sheep, cattle, and calves. They butchered them on the ground and ate them together with the blood.

[20 : 27] Someone said to Saul, look, the men are sinning against the Lord by eating meat that has blood in it. The law that God gave to Israel through Moses had said, you are not to eat blood because of the association of life and blood.

And yet the people are still hungry, that's what they're doing now. You have broken faith, he said, Saul said. Roll a large stone over here at once. Then he said, go out among the men and tell them, each of you bring me your cattle and sheep and slaughter them here and eat them.

Do not sin against the Lord by eating meat with blood still in it. So everyone brought his ox that night and slaughtered it there. Saul just keeps causing more and more problems for the people.

Night has fallen, it's okay that they're eating because the oath was that this day until the sun sets no one should eat food. Saul has caused all of this trouble when he should have been able to win a great victory and secure his people.

And so now they go to sort out the issue. They've eaten, they're ready to charge again against the Philistines, but again, Saul tries to get it right at the beginning and he inquires of the Lord.

[21 : 31] Should we go out and pursue them? And God says, no. So they pause to figure out what's gone wrong. Again, chapter 14, verse 38. They need to figure out why God said no.

Why did God say, don't go pursue the army right now? Verse 38, Saul said, come here, all you who are leaders of the army, let us find out what sin has been committed today.

As surely as the Lord who rescues Israel lives, even if the guilt lies with my son Jonathan, he must die. That's called foreshadowing. But not one of them said a word. Saul then said to the Israelites, you stand over there, I and Jonathan, my son, will stand here.

Do what seems best to you, they replied. Saul prayed to the Lord, the God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant today? If the fault is in me or my son Jonathan, respond with Urim, but if the men of Israel at fault respond with Urim.

And this is how they're casting lots to decide which side is which. Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot and the men were cleared. Saul said, cast the lot between me and Jonathan, my son, and Jonathan was taken.

[22 : 37] Then Saul said to Jonathan, tell me what you've done. So Jonathan told them, I tasted a little honey with the end of my staff and now I must die. Saul said, may God deal with me be it ever so severely if you do not die, Jonathan.

The people are not happy with this. Jonathan is the one who has won them by trusting in the Lord this great victory. And now Saul, because of his foolish oath, is setting out to destroy his son, Jonathan.

Down to verse 45 of 1 Samuel 14. The men said to Saul, should Jonathan die? He who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never. As surely as the Lord lives, not a hair of his head will

fall to the ground, for he did this today with God's help.

So the men rescued Jonathan and he was not put to death. Then Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines and they withdrew to their own land. The good news is, Jonathan escapes.

The bad news is, so do the Philistines. Saul was meant to be the leader. He was meant to trust in the Lord and win victories by the hand of God for his people, but he just keeps getting it wrong.

[23 : 52] He does not trust in the Lord. He does not wait upon the Lord. The people are extremely vulnerable and once again, he's their first king. This is the foundation upon which everything else will grow and be built and it's going so horribly wrong.

This nation needs to become a blessing to the world and that's not going to happen with Saul. If you continue reading after chapter 15, it doesn't get better for Saul.

Saul in many ways gets worse and worse as he goes through his life, but it's not the end. This should be the end. Just like Israel saying to God, their true king, what if we had another king instead of you, like everyone else around us, that should have been the end where God said, sure, have your king and I'm done with you.

But it wasn't the end because God was determined to do his people good. Now you have Saul making these mistakes is not strong enough of a word.

He does make mistakes, but he falls into wickedness again and again and this should be the end. This should sink the people and this fledgling kingdom all together, but it isn't because God is not yet done.

[25 : 10] The first verse of chapter 16, the Lord comes to Samuel and says, how long will you mourn for Saul since I've rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way.

I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king. That'll be David. But the point of seeing that is to see that God comes to Samuel and says, we're not done yet.

Things have gone horribly wrong with Saul, so wrong that I have rejected him from being king, but that isn't the end. The wickedness of Saul is not the end of the story because God is determined to do good to his people and he will raise up David who is not a perfect king, but who is a much better king than Saul.

God has made a promise that this family will become a nation and that this nation will become a blessing to the whole world and so God intervenes. Saul's wickedness is not the end of the story because God made a promise to Abraham that his family would be a nation, that the nation would be a blessing and that that blessing would go to all peoples to the very ends of the earth and so God intervenes.

From here we move to David, like I said, who's much better but also fails and his failures aren't the end of the story. After David, Israel had some good kings and a bunch of bad kings, Israel will eventually pile up their sins so high that they will be overrun by their enemies and they will be cast out of the land into exile.

[26 : 44] Sure sounds like the end of the story but it isn't because God is still determined to do good but God eventually brings the people back into the land so that his promised Savior, the Messiah, would be born who is the true blessing and where all of this leads is us right here and right now because those of us in Christ are those who were redeemed so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to the whole world through Christ Jesus so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.

What does God weave from the tattered mess of Israel asking for a king? What does God weave from the broken shreds of Saul's sin and wickedness and mistake?

What does God pull together from all of these disparate and broken threads? Actually, us. What God does is he fulfills the promise to Abraham by sending Christ as our Savior to make a people who are filled with the Spirit to live the way that he created us to live.

We're the direct descendants of Saul's mess and we're the direct descendants of Abraham's blessing. And this is the world that we live in and God is determined continually to do good.

God is always working good. God determines when the story is done and when the end has truly come and we don't. God is determined to make a world where his glory and beauty would be on display and it's glorious for us to know that he has chosen to do this by blessing us in Christ.

[28 : 37] And God is determined to do this not because of us but because of himself. God is always working good and so we don't get to say when it's over.

I think we probably all have things in our life that we're giving up on. We need to remember that God is always working good for his people.

There isn't any wrong that God cannot forgive. There isn't any uncleanness or filth that we've called on to ourselves that God cannot cleanse.

God is always working good and is determined to do good for his people. There isn't anything in your life that can prevent you being fully welcomed and accepted into the family of God because he is determined for the sake of his name to do good and to create a people in Christ who are full of the Spirit.

There isn't anything that has been done to you that God cannot heal, that God cannot mend. That doesn't mean he makes it all just go away so it doesn't matter anymore. But there isn't anything that's been done to you that God cannot bring you through.

[29 : 52] We don't get to say when it's over. Human wickedness is never the end of the story because God is determined to do good. There isn't any sin or pattern or habit in our lives that we cannot be delivered from.

There isn't anything that holds us back and entangles and ensnares us that God cannot deliver us from because he's always working good and is determined to do good.

There isn't any call upon our lives that God cannot empower us to fulfill. Nothing he tells us to do that he can't equip us to follow through with. There isn't any relationship that God cannot fix and bring back together.

The things that we give up on are the things where we forget that God determines the end, not us.

The things that we give up on are the things where we forget that God is determined to do good.

We are often discouraged and frightened about the wickedness in our own lives and in the world in general. Imagine what it was like being a small person in Saul's kingdom.

[31 : 02] Right? Being a sort of lowly member of the army, being a wife of a man who went to go off and fight with Saul, knowing what a mess things were. Knowing the other army was bigger, that they had swords and you had sticks.

Knowing that there was more of them than there was of you. And then knowing that the person leading your family into this battle, leading your husband or your son into battle, was a mess and was making mistakes over and over again.

In that moment, you would have no way of knowing what God was doing or how he was working. But God was determined to do good and God was absolutely working good through this.

This in many ways can be said of all the parts of 1 Samuel. Go back to the very beginning. What you have is a woman who's unable to have children and a rival wife who makes fun of her.

You have Eli and his two sons, the two sons who are taking advantage of people in the temple. It doesn't look like it's going very well, but where does it lead? It leads to the birth of Samuel, who then leads the people into deliverance, and then brings them into this period where they get David, who is a good king for them.

[32 : 16] We don't get to see how it goes, but we are called to trust that God is always working good because God is determined to do so. In so many ways, we need to say, recognize, our sins, they are many, but his mercy is more.

We need to see that's true in our own lives, that the things we've done, our own wickedness, is not the end of the story, because God is working good. To see that the things done around us and against us and to us are not the end of the story, because God is determined to do good.

And to look around the world and see that the wickedness and suffering that's going on in this world is not the end of the story, because in it, somehow, God is working good and is determined to do good.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you that we have such a firm foundation that we can trust in. Thank you that we don't need to find a way to make you turn to us in good, but that you have done so freely and willingly.

And we ask simply that you would help us to see this and to believe that it is true. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.