

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

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Our Scripture today is 1 Samuel 22:6 to the end of the chapter. It's a very sad story—kind of a sad story for Valentine's Day.

“Now Saul heard that David and his men had been discovered. And Saul, spear in hand, was seated under the tamarisk tree on the hill at Gibeah, with all his officials standing around him. Saul said to them, ‘Listen, men of Benjamin! [By the way, notice carefully that Saul is a Benjamite, and he is appealing to tribal loyalty. David is from the tribe of Judah, and he's basically saying, “Look guys, he's not going to do anything for you when he comes to power. Family's got to stick together.”] Will the son of Jesse [that's David] give all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? Is that why you have all conspired against me? No one tells me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is concerned about me or tells me that my son has incited my servant to lie in wait for me, as he does today.’

But Doeg the Edomite, who was standing with Saul's officials, said, ‘I saw the son of Jesse come to Ahimelech son of Ahitub at Nob. Ahimelech inquired of the LORD for him; he also gave him provisions and the sword of Goliath the Philistine.’

Then the king sent for the priest Ahimelech son of Ahitub and his father's whole family, who were the priests at Nob, and they all came to the king. Saul said, ‘Listen now, son of Ahitub... Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, giving him bread and a sword and inquiring of God for him, so that he has rebelled against me and lies in wait for me, as he does today?’

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

Ahimelech answered the king, ‘Who of all your servants is as loyal as David, the king’s son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard and highly respected in your household? Was that day the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not! Let not the king accuse your servant or any of his father’s family, for your servant knows nothing at all about this whole affair.’

But the king said, ‘You will surely die, Ahimelech, you and your father’s whole family.’

Then the king ordered the guards at his side: ‘Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because they too have sided with David. They knew he was fleeing, yet they did not tell me.’

But the king’s officials were not willing to raise a hand to strike the priests of the LORD.

The king then ordered Doeg, ‘You turn and strike down the priests.’ So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck them down. That day he killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. He also put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep.

But Abiathar, son of Ahimelech...escaped and fled to join David. He told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. Then David said to Abiathar: ‘That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your father’s whole family. Stay with me; don’t be afraid; the man who was seeking your life is seeking mine also. You will be safe with me’” (1 Samuel 22:6–23, NIV).

This is now the third of a continuing series themed “What to Do When Life Gets out of Control.”

We noted when we began, that probably like David, we’ll make some mistakes. He had his fair share. Then last week, we began looking at the things he did right. We’ll continue that one more time, Lord willing. But today, I want to especially focus on what happens when life gets out of control. That is—sometimes there is tremendous, aggravated suffering.

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

Here is the slaughter of the innocent. Here a priest and eighty-five with him are killed, plus men and women of Nob, plus children and infants, plus the atrocity is done even against the livestock. It's a miniature holocaust. We want to look at that. There are times in life when terrible, dreadful things happen, and we didn't bring them on ourselves.

I. The innocent do suffer.

We need to establish and make that very clear. This is a slaughter of the innocent. Ahimelech had done nothing, nor had his family done anything worthy of this kind of thing. Maybe their father and grandfather had not served the Lord faithfully. But they themselves were in a position of innocence. In fact, Ahimelech, if anything, seems to be growing in character and maturity. When we first find him back in chapter 21, we find him very apprehensive of being visited by such a high member of the court as David. So, he trembles in David's presence. Here, when he is on trial for his life before Saul, it's never mentioned that he trembles. Rather, he's bold. He equips himself rather well by saying, "I'm innocent, and David is innocent as well. And you know it, Saul." He's a man of courage and conviction.

I emphasize this aspect of innocence because each of us, if we are serious about our faith, is going to face times when we are devastated. We feel bad things have happened to us, and God has not answered our prayer for either protection or deliverance. We look and say, "Why? I'm innocent! I'm the victim here."

There are times in our life when we have to get to the rock bottom of our faith. We have to get past the fluff, the promotionalism, and all the easy promises. We need to get down to the bedrock. If you've never had anything bad happen to you, probably your typical response is the same response I've had, "Those things happen to other people. That will never happen to me." I hope it never does. But just because you say it won't happen, that is no guarantee it won't. When

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

we find these kinds of things occurring to us, we feel as the psalmist did, “Why stand so far off, Lord? Hiding thyself in time of need? Where are You, Lord? Are You out there? Are You hiding somewhere?” Or we feel like the prophet Habakkuk in 1:13, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” He is saying, “What are You doing, God?” The innocent suffer, and it creates more monumental problems in our hearts and minds when we’re the innocent, especially. This leads us to the second aspect of today’s message.

II. Why doesn’t God take action to avoid such tragedies?

Look at this particular incident in 1 Samuel 22. I can think of about seven ways God could have intervened and prevented the suffering of the innocent. The first thing He could have done was to have put it in David’s head to never make contact with Ahimelech in the first place. It was that contact that got Ahimelech in trouble. So why not just put it in David’s head to go somewhere else? Or why not put it in Ahimelech’s head to be gone from home—down for some rest and relaxation at the oasis, instead of at Nob where David would meet him? Or why wasn’t Doeg gone when David showed up. If he was going to be there, at least put it in Doeg’s head to get out of there so he wouldn’t have been a witness to the transaction between them and made the false assumptions that he made. Or why not simply override Saul’s free will. Saul says, “I’m going to kill you,” and as those words come out of his lips, the Lord turns on a vacuum inside Saul that sucks the words right back from him. The more he tries to get them out, the more the words come with a thud back into him. Why didn’t God override his free will? Or how about, why didn’t the Lord send an angel to protect Ahimelech? Doeg gets ready to slay him, and the angel shows up and puts his mighty hand on Doeg’s wrist. Or why not turn the sword into a feather?

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

None of these things are done. There is no interposition of the Lord's strength and protection here for Ahimelech. Why? Why does God not intervene? Granted, sometimes He will intervene. But many times, He doesn't.

Imagine the kind of world it would be if God always intervened to protect the innocent from the bad consequences of their own decisions or other people's decisions. Suppose we had an assumption that the good are always going to be protected—the good are always going to be delivered. And let's suppose further that the Lord says, "I'm going to take care of My good guys. There's not a thing he can do to himself or anybody else can do to him. I'm going to protect him, and he's going to be alright." Suppose I choose to jump out of a window on a high floor. The Lord has a commitment to me, and good guys don't crash. Are Christians exempt from the laws of gravity? Do we operate by different laws than the non-Christian?

Or suppose I want to go to the airport and get there, and it is jammed. I hate to wait. Put me in a line, and I have claustrophobia. I see another line and say, "Lord, I can't stand this wait anymore. I know You're going to protect me. I'm going to get in the southbound lane and go north." Does God have an obligation to protect me and others from the consequences of my bad choices?

Suppose someone comes along and says, "I've got an old Indian map, and it shows there's gold buried in the front lawn of the church. And I need five thousand dollars to get the equipment here to turn up a gold mine, and you'll be a millionaire. Would you invest your money with me?" Is God going to protect me from the consequences of that stupid decision? God leaves us room to be human, doesn't He? Part of being human and part of being free is that we have free choice along with the consequences of our choices. You cannot have free choice if you can skip the consequences. Choices always have consequences.

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

Imagine God saying to a person, “How do you plan to get money to pay your bills? Are you going to do some hard work, or are you going to grab an old lady’s pocketbook and run off with it? What do you want to do? Grab a pocketbook?” Then God says, “No, that’s wrong. I can’t let you do that. Choose again.” A robbery has been prevented. But has the man been permitted to operate as a free moral being? Has God permitted him to choose between the path of good and the path of evil? Or has God reduced him to the level of a robot by taking away, not only his freedom of choice, but the freedom of consequences. If he robs the lady, she is going to bear the consequences of his bad decision, and she’s going to be the innocent one. The innocent also, because of freedom, are going to suffer from the bad choices of other people. In order to let us be free, in order to let us be human—God lets us be free to choose right from wrong.

Most illustrations I used back up the principle that God will not protect you from the bad consequences of your own decisions. But will He protect you from the bad consequences of other people’s bad decisions? That’s what we have in the Scripture with Ahimelech. Ahimelech is innocent. His whole family is innocent. But he is paying the consequences of someone else’s bad choice. He is like the family driving down the road that the drunk plows into at night. Every member of the family is killed. They were innocent. They were not protected from the consequences of the evil decision of the person who decided to get into a car totally drunk.

Sometimes God does protect us. There is a certain mystery there. In Acts 12, you see this sharply. You have two of the top apostles, two of the inner three—they are both in prison. James and Peter—both of them innocent. Herod makes an evil decision—the consequences of which James experiences. He is killed—martyred. On the other hand, God intervenes on behalf of Peter, and Peter walks free. We’re never really given the reason in Scripture—why He protected one and the other He did not.

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

I'd say, based upon reading Scripture and practical observance, that perhaps the preponderance of times God lets natural laws of cause and effect work is because it's a way of keeping freedom in the world—freedom to choose. You say, "I don't like that kind of world. And I'm not sure I buy the justice of a God who would allow evil consequences to happen to innocent people. I'm uncomfortable with that." A lot of people are. That's the whole problem of evil. There will be some who look at that and say, "How can you find a good God in a world where such things happen?" My response is—we, as human beings, are not in a position to judge God based upon what we think we would choose in the same situation. Would we rather allow freedom and risk the bad consequences? Or deny freedom to people? How would we do that?

Suppose you were an inventor who worked on a machine—a magnificent machine. You knew that once the machine was patented and manufactured, it was going to dramatically alter the life of every single person in the civilized world—and ultimately the whole world. Anyone who could afford the machine and learn how to use it, their life would be immeasurably improved. The economy of country after country and family after family would also be improved.

Convenience, ease, and much potential would open up to people because you invented this magnificent machine. But just as you were going for the patent, you were told the hidden price of the patent—fifty thousand people a year must be sacrificed as a consequence of putting your machine on the market. Is your invention worth fifty thousand lives a year? Most of you would say, "No. There's no invention worth fifty thousand lives a year."

But that is a choice we've already made when we take our ignition key and get into our automobile. That magnificent machine—which has so revolutionized all of our lives and so improved our economy. Automobiles cost us fifty thousand American lives a year—and untold maiming and injuries. We say that's the price of letting people drive down the road freely. They

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

may drive too fast. Can you imagine if someone tried to ban the automobile on the grounds that it costs fifty thousand lives a year? “We’re going to do away with the automobile. It’s going to cease to be manufactured. This country is going back to the horse.”

We know what kind of vote that would get—it wouldn’t fly. We can’t even agree to let the speed limit stay at fifty-five. We’re so in a hurry, we’ve got to go ten miles an hour more, and the consequence of that is around five to ten thousand lives a year. But we say, “It’s worth it.” We’re in no position to sit in judgment upon God and talk to Him about justice. We’re not sure we’ve got it all together ourselves. We make decisions that cost people—innocent people. We make those decisions because we perceive there is a benefit for people being free to drive—to having access to lots of things they wouldn’t have access to otherwise. We say, “We realize, if you’re going to be free, you must have consequences.”

If God suspended the freedom of Doeg and suspended the freedom of Saul so that innocent people would not bear the consequences—if He did this across the board—then not only would freedom be lost, but so would all the qualities of the human spirit that go with freedom. Qualities like courage. Who needs courage if they’re always going to be protected? Who needs heroism? Who needs perseverance? Why persevere if we know the situation is going to work out anyway? Why have faith? Why exercise compassion? Compassion is poured out so much upon the innocent. If the innocent can’t suffer, there’s no need for compassion. We would fall into an amoral world, since choices for evil really wouldn’t matter. Gone would be justice and the need to work for good.

If I’m in a gall bladder attack, I am not interested in the doctor talking to me about the nature and structure of the gall bladder. Or about the wonderful things he learned about that aspect of the anatomy when he was in medical school. All I want is a shot or a pill—put me out of my pain.

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

One of the frustrations I have personally in the ministry is when I am called to come alongside someone in a time of difficulty, there is no spiritual shot or pill I can give them. The problem is not subject to a quick injection. It's not subject to a microwave solution. Yet, they're in so much pain, and they don't care about all the theory of why God made us with freedom and that sort of thing. That's when we struggle with it.

The Creator does not often give us quick fixes. He made us with freedom, and freedom means we suffer both the good and the bad consequences of our own decisions and of other people's decisions. The innocent suffer. God, as a general rule, does not interpose himself between the decision and the consequences of that decision. That leads us to a third principle in 1 Samuel.

III. There is still help to be gained from God's Word in a time when the innocent are being slaughtered.

What help do we have here for us? We have five principles of help.

A. First, don't be consumed with your own failures. David, at the end of this chapter, admits freely that not only are Saul and Doeg responsible for the deaths of Ahimelech and his family, but he is responsible also. It was David who made the decision to lie, and that got Ahimelech in trouble in the first place. Go back to chapter 21 to see what he did. He admits responsibility. But he doesn't get stuck there. I'm convinced at this point, when this atrocity occurred, David could have said, "I'm in some way partly responsible. And I can't go on with life." One of the things I find when people are in a difficult, severe situation is they can become traumatized. They may never get over their mistake and go on with life. They retreat into a shell—a hiding place. They get fixed on that mistake. David makes a full admission of the mistake, but he doesn't say, "I can never live with myself again." He made a bad error, but he nevertheless went on with life. That's simply good mental and spiritual health—a decision to go on living—a decision where we

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

realize one severe misjudgment or one severe sin does not disqualify us from further usefulness to God, our nation, our family, or ourselves. David went on. He did not become consumed with his failure. I've had the experience of being with people who were consumed with their failures. It's a tragedy.

B. The second thing I find with David is that in fighting his enemy, he did not become like his enemy. In fighting Saul, he didn't adopt the personality of Saul. He kept on being David.

If someone is doing something bad to us that we don't like and has become our enemy, the tendency in life is to respond in kind. "You hurt me, and I'll hurt you!" You have had a person do everything in the world evil to you, and it's really critical you not buy into their personality and become them in the process of fighting them. David always stays himself. We'll see this as we continue to go through 1 Samuel.

C. The third thing David does is he knows the Lord will make things right. Psalm 52 is written by David after he gets word that Doeg has killed. In Psalm 52, David says, "Surely God will bring you down [speaking to Doeg] to everlasting ruin." He says of himself, "I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God. I trust in God's unfailing love forever and ever." What David is doing here is basically saying, "There will come a moment when God will right this wrong." Within David's language is the prospect that God will not right the wrong until we are in the forever and ever.

As Christians living in southern California, we have gotten into this-world mentality. There's a tremendous pressure on ministry and the church. Christians, for example, have been criticized for having a belief in heaven because critics say, "All you people want is pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, and you don't want to have to deal with life as it is right now." So we've got this doctrine of heaven, but we've let the critics chase us away from singing the songs of heaven or

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

preaching the doctrine of heaven—or hell. Hell is unpopular in the current vernacular, and heaven seems ethereal, theoretical, and illusive. So the focus of most contemporary ministry is to help us live now—be a better husband, be a better wife, be a better single adult, be a better parent, be a better child, be a better worker, and be a better this or that—all that is great and helpful. But as Christians, we can never lose sight of the fact that God has created us in time, wrapped around by eternity. There are some things that will wait for eternity before they'll be righted. You may not see an injustice righted within your lifetime. You may need to wait for that eternal day when we all get to heaven. What a day of rejoicing that will be! David knows that. The Lord will one day make all things right. Paul eloquently said, “If only for this life we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.”

D. The fourth thing that's so important when we're going through this time of personal holocaust is to look at what God is doing in us. In David's life, he's being made more and more a man of God. His hard bumps in life, rather than derailing him, are deepening him, his walk, and his faith. My favorite verses in the Bible are Romans 5:3–4, “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” It's a process. Look at what God is doing in you.

E. Then keep perspective. Paul says in Romans 8, in essence, “There will come a day when the glory of eternity will outweigh the present groaning. Know right now that the Holy Spirit is helping you—praying through you and in you. Know that God is working for the good.” God is always working for the good. The enemy meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. The church lives when it can get over and above the bad things that are happening to it. And know that the great God we serve is greater than the bad things that are happening.

God is strong and enduring. His power is seen in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and we may never see His full display of power while we breathe mortal breath. We know His power to

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 3

1 Samuel 22

raise us from the dead and bring us to Him in His eternal habitation is strong and enduring. We are Christians, not for this life only. If only for this life, we are most to be pitied. We are Christians because, first of all, Christ is real. And what He promises is real as well. We can be held by that truth in the times we're going through difficulty.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we thank You for this moment when we can unite our hearts to pray to You. I want to pray for those within our church fellowship today who are innocently involved in suffering through the bad choices of another. I pray that You'll protect them in this hour of trial—when their day of evil has come. Protect them from the power of the evil one to destroy them. Instead, give them strength in their trial. Let them have the kind of faith of Job who says, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him."

Help our faith to be stronger in You, Lord, than to simply be when we have money in the bank, health, and a good car to drive. Help us not to say only then, "God must love me." Help us to have the kind of faith that believes You when we are poor, when we are in need, when we are hurting, when we are grieving, and when we are at our worst moment in life. Help us to have that kind of faith. Put a floor underneath our feet, Lord, upon which we can stand. Thank You that You're never going to abandon us, You're never going to leave us, and You're never going to deny us. These things are always absolute, and we thank You. Bring encouragement and strength today to all who suffer. We ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.