

# The Providence of God

*Faithfulness of God*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Samuel 21-23  
**Preached On:** Sunday, November 13, 2022

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Samuel 21. There in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel, we're going to begin in chapter 21 and today in a very timely fashion we're actually going to cover chapters 21 through 23. But if you are a guest or a visitor with us, I want to welcome you to a journey not only through the book of 1 Samuel but really a journey that took place thousands of years ago that's being played out in our own lives today, what does it look like when these two clashing realities come together. On one side, you've got a culture, you've got a community that is moving from the sacred to the secular. In the beginning of 1 Samuel, the people of God were governed by the judges of God according to the word of God, but by the time they get to chapter 8 they said, "We don't want to look like God, sound like God, be distinct, holy or different anymore. We want to be just like every other nation. Give us a king." So we see that slippery slope into pure secularism by the people of God, but yet on the other hand you've got the faithfulness of God. In spite of the environment, in spite of the culture, in spite of everything that is happening, God is faithful to those who are faithful to his word, his will and his way, and no better person do we see this played out than in the life of whom we know as King David.

Today, beginning in chapter 21, he's really on the run. Saul has had the anointing removed from him, David has had it placed on him, and even though Saul wears the crown, he is jealous of David, he has tried to eliminate him, eradicate him, so much so that his own biological son Jonathan had to help David escape from his plot and his plan. Over these chapters, we see David not just running for his life but really questioning in light of the fact that he's a man after God's own heart and by the fact that he's been anointed by God, why is the story playing out this way? Have you ever questioned that about your own life? You love the Lord, you're committed to the Lord, so why does life not look the way that we would have drawn it out?

Today, we're going to talk about the providence of God. Now that word "providence" is kind of a heavy word, so to speak. I want to give you just the straight up dictionary definition and then I want to speak to it very theologically or biblically. The definition for providence is basically timely preparation for future actualities. What does that mean? That means that God is working behind the scenes whether you realize it or not. What you just heard, even when I don't see it he's working. Even when I don't feel it he is

working. Kind of the classic illustration before we turn to 1 Samuel 21 is the story of the book of Esther. Here is this young lady, Jewish in background. Her uncle Mordecai, they discover that there's an insider by the name of Haman who wants to eradicate the Jewish people. She just so happens to be married to the king and the man who can stop it. When you look at the book of Esther, when you look at the story of Esther, there's never a mention of the name God. His name is not there. His titles are not. He's not even referenced and so as you're reading the story, you begin to question like David did and like you and I did, where is God in all of this? But then you get to the end of the story and what do you see? That God's fingerprints were on every single aspect of the story. That is what providence is.

Today, as we turn to chapter 21, beginning in verse 8, we're going to look at four specific stories over the course of these three chapters. I want to begin with the perspective. In order to understand how God is moving when we don't see him and when we don't feel him, we have to have his perspective not ours. Remember, David is running for his life. Chapter 21, verse 8, it says,

8 And David said unto Ahimelech, And is there not here under thine hand spear or sword? for I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste. 9 And the priest said, The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod: if thou wilt take that, take it: for there is no other save that here. And David said, There is none like that; give it me.

Think about it. He's on the run. His best friend has literally risked his life for his own well-being. He's all alone. He has nobody to support him. He has no weapon in his hand and Saul has the armies chasing after him. It's not looking good but providence says even when you don't see him he's working. Even when you don't feel him he's working. God did not put that sword there that morning. It had probably been there for weeks or months. You see, when we talk about the providence of God, from David's perspective, from our perspective it's, "God, do you not see this mess?" And God's saying, "Oh, I prepared long before today. I've arranged situations, I've arranged scenarios. I've put things in place." Notice what David says about this sword, "There is none better." That sword would have weighed 70 pounds. That sword would have been massive in size. And that sword is the very sword that David used to not only cut off Goliath's head but then he drug that ugly head back to camp in chapter 17. God was moving in the background and that's the perspective we need to have today, that even when we don't see it, even when we don't feel it, God is working despite what we observe in our circumstances.

This next section is fascinating to me. It's the possibilities of how God is moving in the background. Beginning in verse 10 it says,

10 And David arose, and fled that day for fear of Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath. 11 And the servants of Achish said unto him, Is not this David the king of the land? did they not sing one to another of him in

dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands? 12 And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath. 13 And he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard. 14 Then said Achish unto his servants, Lo, ye see the man is mad: wherefore then have ye brought him to me? 15 Have I need of mad men, that ye have brought this fellow to play the mad man in my presence? shall this fellow come into my house?

Now you realize you put the pieces together, this is the man who's in charge of the people and the place where Goliath was from. This is the man who knew that this young man by the name of David was the one who was responsible for 10,000+ of his own men and soldiers being killed on the battlefield. It's not a situation that anyone would want to walk into, much less with the only weapon you've got as a young teenager is a 70 pound sword.

So what did David do? Well, it says he acted like a madman. Now this is important: David is anointed of God, David has a heart that is after God, there's no reference of an evil spirit, there's no reference of disobedience, it just says he "played the madman." Now I'm going to give you two ways to respond to this passage. The first one is what I call the humorous and the second one is what I call the survival.

Let's deal with the humorous for just a moment. This may not resonate as much with you as it does with me but do you realize that David was the youngest of a family of all boys? That's right. He had seven older brothers. What do we call the baby of the family? The family clown, do we not? Oh, absolutely. Why? Because there are so many ahead of him on the "ladder" they have to do whatever they can do to get whatever attention they can get. Why is it, and maybe I'm the only one in the room, why is it that it seems like the caboose of the family is the loudest of the family? The caboose of the family is the one, I mean, if it's going to be done, you can go ahead and stick his name to it. In other words, all David did is said, "You know what? I used to have to get attention in my own house, boy, I bet I can distract some attention in this house."

That's the humorous side, but let's talk to the survival side for just a moment. Do you remember what David's task was, his occupation even as a young man? He was a shepherd. Think about that. In the middle of the night, there he is guarding the sheep. He even said to Saul in chapter 17, he said, "I've killed a bear. I've killed a lion." We know he was a marksman with a slingshot and a rock but how many times may he possibly have dozed off and there came one of those animals creeping up, a pack of coyotes, a bear, whatever it may be. You say, "Why is this important?" Because anytime you find yourself in a situation like that, what do they tell you to do? Get big and get loud. Why? Because you've got to make the predator believe that he should be more fearful than you are. Imagine how many times David would have had to scare off a bear. He would have had to scare off a lion. He would have had to scare off a pack of coyotes in the middle of the night all by himself.

You say, "Why is this so important to providence?" Because I want you to think about the job of a shepherd. This is a young man in the middle of the night. His friends are in town having a good time. His family is asleep and he's out there all by his lonesome. Let's make it real personal: he's the future king, he's the anointed of God. Maybe just maybe he was having this thought, "God, I thought you had big plans for me so why am I stuck out here with a bunch of stinky sheep scaring off coyotes?" Do you know what David didn't realize? David didn't realize that God was preparing him. David didn't realize that God was shaping him. There were some skills, there were some things he needed to know years in advance. He had no idea that the king of Gath was going to... He had no idea but God did and so years before he prepared him.

Many many years ago between college and graduate school, I found myself in one of those necessary occupational places where I needed more money than I needed my own reputation, in other words, I was going to graduate school, I was about to get married, I was willing to do anything for whoever paid me the most to do it. That being said, a good friend of mine who owned a hydraulics company, he hired me. I was a salesman. I was a hotshot salesman. Don't be impressed, in Texas hotshot means go and get when we tell you to get it. It doesn't mean you're actually good at what you're doing, it just means you go to a different place every day.

All that being said, the last two weeks of the summer, I'm about to go to graduate school, the owner of this company comes to me and he says, "Jeff, I need you to do something for me." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I need you to help me with inventory." I said, "Well, that's not a problem." And then he took me into this warehouse, from floor to ceiling as far as you could see were these plastic packages of O-rings. Now if you don't know what an O-ring is, just think of a pretty sturdy rubber band that keeps hydraulics from leaking and blowing and all that other kind of stuff. I said, "Okay, what do you need me to do?" He said, "You see on this package it says 'quantity 10'?" I said, "Yes." He goes, "I need you to open up the package and make sure there's 10, and then I need you to open up the next package and make sure there's the amount that's in there." He said, "I need you to count every bag, every O-ring, and with a Sharpie I need you to write the exact number of O-rings on the label."

Now anybody who has met me for more than 30 seconds knows my personality. I'm going to sit by myself in a warehouse of O-rings for hour after hour after hour making sure that the label is actually correct. Can I tell you how many times I voiced this prayer at God, "Hey, do you hate me! What am I doing here? Seriously?" I mean, it drove me nuts. Now you can imagine two weeks of nothing but counting O-rings, you can imagine do you know how many of those packages were mislabeled? Like 3. That's it.

A couple of months later, I received a letter from the owner of the company and family friend of ours who not only thanked me for the summer but he explained the illustration. He said, "Jeff, there are so many times where we have an emergency or we have a job come in that has to be done in the immediate. It's dangerous. It has to happen." And he said, "If we don't know exactly how many O-rings are in that package, we might be short

and if we're short we can't get the job done, if we can't get the job done," you fill in the blank. And he said these words, he said, "You have no idea not only how much you've helped my company but the lesson that you learned while doing it." Now I've wanted to say, "The lesson I learned is never count O-rings again is what I learned." But can I tell you 30 years later how many times in my life I've made sure that the details were in place today because if they're not, it's going to be weeks or months or years from now and it's not going to be good. In other words, sometimes we're going through life going what does this have to do with God's big picture? Everything has to do with God's big picture. The problem is David couldn't see it, David couldn't feel it, and he didn't know how it was going to play out.

Then we get to chapter 22 in verses 1 and 2. It says,

1 David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave Adullam: and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down thither to him. 2 And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men.

This is the famous group of people known as David's mighty men. I want you to think we call them the mighty men, look at the description the Bible gives them. It says they were in distress, they were in debt, and they were dis. It's like middle school dodge ball, it's the last people picked for the team, that's what it is. Nobody wanted them but do you know what's beautiful about this? Think about David for just a moment. Do you think David's was flowing in money? No, he was on the run. Do you think he was discontented? I know he was.

Remember the story of Elijah? Wins this incredible battle against the Baal worshipers, defeats hundreds of these guys. He's running from the battle, he's escaping from Ahab and Jezebel and all these other characters, and he finds himself under a tree whining to God saying, "O God, why did you do this? I'm the only one left!" Remember what God said? "Oh no, there's 7,000 who have yet to bend the knee."

Do you know what's important about those 400 men? They may not have been shepherds in the middle of the night but I'd be willing to bet they had been through similar circumstances as David. They had been through times where they questioned God. There had been times where they were bothered by the circumstances and the situation in their life but what is God going to do? He's going to bring these 400 men together. They're in debt, they're discontented, they're frustrated, nobody else believes in them and God does an incredible work with them.

You've got to forgive me this morning, but one of Tracy and I's favorite movies is a movie known as "The Replacements." If you watch the tv edition, they take out all the bad language, but here's the story of "The Replacements." It's a real far-fetched story. It's a story about basically over-pampered, privileged, professional athletes who want more

money. I know you can never think of a story such as that but that's how the movie plays out. And they go on strike and they replace them, hence the name of the movie, with a bunch of guys who never got drafted, a bunch of guys who the coaches never believed in, a bunch of guys who basically had been marginalized to non-athletic competition. Long movie short, they get to a game, a final game. They win the game. The team goes to the playoffs. They lose. They don't. Here's the problem: the other team, the professionals, have come back so instead of playing against like-minded replacement players they've got to play against guys that are going to be in the Hall of Fame, guys that play in the all pro game. I mean, they're playing against the real deal. And before the game, the coach pulls them aside, I love this scene, he pulls them aside and he says, "Let me tell you about tonight." He said, "Tomorrow morning when you wake up, there are no million dollar contracts for you. There are no sports cars for you. There are no mansions for you." He said, "You know what?" He said, "For you there is no tomorrow and that makes you very dangerous people."

Do you know what God will do in his providence? He will get you to a point where you question if there's ever going to be a tomorrow. He will get you to a point where you question if you can take another step, if you could speak another word, if you can make it another day. Do you know what that makes you? A very dangerous person because you're at that point where the only one you have is God. And that's where David is. He's on the run. Saul's chasing him. All he has is a big old sword he can hardly swing. And what does God do? God brings 400 other people that are in the same position, walking through the same thing, and he does an incredible mighty work with them.

Up to this point in the story, we see that David didn't see what God saw, David didn't know what God knew, but at some point we need direction, at some point we need instructions, and this is up to this point, this is kind of one of those rare moments in my ministry, this is kind of a feel-good message, I mean, that God's got something for you, you just can't see it yet. But the question is and that's the question, the big question mark is how do we know? Where is it written down?

Go to chapter 23 for just a moment and I want to share with you one of the most fascinating passages in all of the Bible. Remember, he's on the run, he's got 400 men, he doesn't understand why and what God is doing. Verse 7 of chapter 23 it says,

7 And it was told Saul that David was come to Keilah. And Saul said, God hath delivered him into mine hand; for he is shut in, by entering into a town that hath gates and bars.

Push pause there for just a moment. David's cornered. He's surrounded. He's got no way out and all he's got is 400 people just like him. They don't have any weapons. They don't have any armor. The only thing they've got is God.

Verse 8,

8 And Saul called all the people together to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. 9 And David knew that Saul secretly practised mischief against him; and he said to Abiathar the priest, Bring hither the ephod. 10 Then said David, O LORD God of Israel, thy servant hath certainly heard that Saul seeketh to come to Keilah, to destroy the city for my sake. 11 Will the men of Keilah deliver me up into his hand? will Saul come down, as thy servant hath heard? O LORD God of Israel, I beseech thee, tell thy servant. And the LORD said, He will come down. 12 Then said David, Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the LORD said, They will deliver thee up.

You do realize this is very important information that God has given to David. I want to talk about the particulars for just a moment. How did David know what was about to happen? How did David know how to properly respond? What does he say here? It says he went to the priests in verse 9 and he says, "Bring the ephod." Now the ephod is something that you may or may not be familiar with but basically it was a linen coat that the priests wore, and on the front of it was a breastplate. Now I've got a picture to show you this morning because it's one of those things that we're not real familiar with, but this is essentially what it looked like. So I want you to imagine the priest walking in to what we know as the tabernacle or later in the temple. What was his job? To be an intermediary between the people and God, right? So that breastplate is pretty important because on that breastplate you have the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. So when he goes into that tabernacle, when he goes into that temple, he is a mediator between the people and God. But here's the fascinating thing about this ephod and the breastplate. According to Exodus 28 when God instituted right after the instructions for building the tabernacle, there was somewhat of a pouch right below it and in that pouch had two rocks, they're called the Urim and the Thummim, and basically it means light and perfection, what those words mean, and that you see a record in the Old Testament that when the people of God didn't know what to do, that the Lord would instruct the priest to pull out one of those rocks. Obviously, black meant no or stop, and white meant go or yes.

And you see a lot of stories in the Bible about that but today I want to give you one of those "could it be's." Is it possible, I mean, look at the answer that God gave David, is it yes or no? No. He said, "Bring me the ephod." He has got a question. He very specifically answers him what will occur. Here's the fascinating thing about that breastplate: it had 12 names on the stones of the 12 tribes of Israel, in addition to that it had the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now if you take all of those names, now remember they would have been in Hebrew, the Hebrew alphabet has 22 consonants, originally it did not have any vowels. If you take all of those 15 names and you put them all together, you've got every single letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Could it be that it was more than a yes and a no? Could it be that God actually "spelled it out for him"? Lest you think that I've "lost my mind," can I show you a picture of how we used to send messages to each other. I'll just let that sit there for a moment. Y'all remember when we used to text each other and you had to push the button 2-3 times to get the letter you wanted? You know, there's an old adage, the more things change, the more they stay the same. It is possible that when

David sought the Lord, he actually gave him the letters in the words he needed? You realize the ephod was given to the Israelites years before David ever showed up.

All right, if you're having one of those David days, I want you to think about this book you have in your hand. Do you realize that God gave us these words a thousand years before anybody knew of the English language? Do you realize that God gave us these words thousands of years before the majority of our ancestors ever stepped foot on this continent? And yet today you have every single word given in advance. God knew what you were going to walk through. He knew the struggles. He knew that our culture would look just like 1 Samuel. You say, "What do we do?" Isn't it great to know God gave us these well in advance knowing just when we would need them?

Let me pull it all together, 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ allows himself to be crucified on a cruel cross, he miraculously and victoriously three days later, he raises from the grave and this book says that if you'll call upon him, he will save you. Why is that important? Because Jesus Christ went to the cross thousands of years before you were ever born and do you know what he knew? He knew you would be here. He knew you would sin. He knew you would mess up and he knew you couldn't fix the problem. So well in advance, according to his providence, he said, "Let me put this into place," just like David showing up going, "I don't have anything," and he says, "Here's the sword."

Maybe today you're in that place saying, "I'm tapped out. I've got nothing. I don't know what to do." Do you know what the Lord is saying? Mercy is available. Grace is available. Forgiveness is available. Salvation is available. And it was put into place well before you even arrived on planet earth. You see, the providence of God is he knows everything you're struggling with, everything you're walking through. If you don't see it, he's working. If you don't feel it, he's working. He never stops. He never stops working.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that individual today in person, maybe you're watching online, but maybe you're that person saying, "You know what? I never realized that God's love and care for me extended to such a great extent." Maybe you're familiar with the story, maybe you knew the personalities and the facts and such but you never realized that when Jesus Christ went to that cross, when Jesus Christ rose from that grave, maybe you never thought that he was thinking of and he knew of you well in advance, and maybe today is that day where you do what his Bible says, you call on him for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of your soul. If you're that person today, can I encourage you to do so? It's not about saying a certain set of words in a certain order. It's not whether you do it out loud or quietly. The Bible says it's the cry of the heart and maybe today is the day where not only do you realize the providence of God in your life but it's led to this day where you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. If you're that person today, let me encourage you just to cry out and maybe your cry goes something like this. "God, today I recognize that I've sinned and, God, I have done things you told me not to do, I've said things you told me not to say and, God, I've been places you told me never to go, and I've thought things you told me never to place my thoughts upon and the Bible says, your Bible says the wages of my sin is death and, God, today I agree that I deserve it. But it also says the gift of God is eternal



life through Jesus Christ our Lord, so today I'm putting everything in the basket of Jesus. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. He lived a sinless life on my behalf. He died a sacrificial death on my behalf. And God, I believe that when Jesus Christ rose from the grave he made it possible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the issues and the struggles and the problems of this world but I know I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe today you're that person who for the very first time you cried out to the Lord. In just a moment, I'm going to pray for us and let me encourage you just to step out and step forward. We've got a team of folks, myself included, who would love to spend some time with you, just hear your story and pray with you, pray for you. Maybe today you say, "Well, I've already made that decision." Maybe the Lord used his word to communicate maybe you need to follow in baptism, maybe you need to be a part of this incredible family of faith, maybe you just need to be prayed with, prayed for, whatever it is, but I do know after I pray and we stand and sing, every one of us needs to render a decision leaving this place, will we stay faithful, will we stay true, will we continue in God's plan even if we can't see or feel what he's doing.

*Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you that we can look back and see your hand in all of it even though rarely do we see it in the midst of it. Lord, today as we look back and we see what you did on Calvary, we see what you did at the empty tomb, may we not take it for granted, may we simply respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*