

The Irrationality of Sin and Rebellion

1Samuel 19:18-24

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 3-6-2011

Introduction – the “mystery of iniquity”

When I was in tenth grade, my father was reading devotions from the book of Numbers. And Dad had just finished reading the passage where God gets upset with the Israelites for grumbling over the manna. They wanted to go back to Egypt so that they could eat the leaks, garlies, cucumbers, and other delicious food. And I remember shaking my head and wondering how they could complain after seeing so many miracles and so many provisions from the Lord. And I expressed my amazement at their hard heartedness to my father. And my dad said something to the effect of, “But Phil, is that any different than your complaining yesterday over having to eat oatmeal porridge every morning.” He blew my cover. And it struck me what a hypocrite I was being. I could clearly see the sin of the Israelites who grumbled over eating manna three times a day every day for years, but I couldn’t see the sin of my own grumbling over one meal that stayed the same. I could see their irrationality, but I couldn’t see my own. Has anyone here had the same kind of blindness? We tend not to see our own sins as clearly.

This blindness to our own sin is in part what enables us to overlook or excuse in ourselves what others shake their heads at in absolute amazement. We may shake our heads at Saul’s attempts to murder David. I’m sure David shook his head at Saul. How could Saul be so blind? How could he be so unthankful? That just seems crazy. But when we get into 2Samuel we will see that David was able to salve his conscience over his murder of Uriah. He did exactly the same thing. He successfully killed his friend where Saul failed. At that point David had become blinded about the seriousness of his sin.

From hindsight, that looks obvious to us. We look at both of those sins and we are shocked because those sins look so huge in our culture. But to a man who probably couldn’t count the number of people that he had killed in his life, that death maybe didn’t seem that big. If you think that you could never do what Saul or David did, you do not yet understand your heart or what Paul called “the mystery of iniquity.” It’s a mystery. All sin is puzzling. All sin is irrational.

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It's irrational first because we are choosing to do something self-destructive. We are choosing to believe our flesh over the wisdom of God. We are choosing to believe something is safe that God says is dangerous. Every single time we sin we are losing something far greater than we gain. It's irrational. It doesn't make sense. Yet we all do it.

But secondly, it is irrational because of the heart's ability to engage in self-deception. We engage in a sin that God clearly calls a sin, and then we set to work to rationalize why it really isn't so bad after all. Some of us rationalize without any theological proof texts and some of us are really good at rationalizing with our theology. If any of you are parents, you have probably experienced this. You have probably had a family member who cannot see his or her sins even though you have so clearly pointed those sins out to them. I run across this all the time in my counseling. So there is a mystery when it comes to recognizing sin. This is why we need the supernatural illumination of the Holy Spirit.

But there is also a mystery when it comes to people failing to care about the fallout. People go on drugs and they don't care that their brain will be fried and their future life will be a disaster. Why does Satan keep fighting against God? Does he think he can win? It's irrational. It was totally irrational for Adam and Eve to ignore the thousands of good fruit trees that God had given them to eat, and to want to eat from the one tree that God said "No" to. They lost everything for that one bite. And God had warned them about it. God had promised that in the day that they eat of it, they would surely die. They died spiritually; they were separated from God; alienated from each other; lost the garden; they flung this world into the turmoil and chaos that it has been in ever since. That first sin was irrational because it didn't take seriously the consequences of sin.

In the middle of January I sent a one-page document to everyone from a friend of mine who lost everything because he gave in to lust one time. He wrote up 23 reasons why sexual sin is stupid, stupid, absolutely stupid. He wrote those very compelling reasons to warn others not to do what he did. But if we don't live by the faith that David lived by, we could read those 23 reasons and fall into sexual sin anyway. It is totally irrational for a man to walk away from a wonderful wife and great children and get married to a lesser woman; yet men do it all the time. It is irrational for a politician who is held in high esteem to lie in order to make himself look good, but it happens. I think this passage is just one of hundreds of testimonies in the Scripture to the irrationality of sin. And I hope as we go through this passage that it will make you hate sin all the more and to appreciate God's mercy

more fully. I hope it makes you fear sin like Jude says we should and makes you cling to God and say, “Lord, keep me from stumbling; keep me from this stupidity of sin; keep me from succumbing to the mystery of iniquity.”

I. Saul has providential warnings, yet ignores them. This willful ignorance is irrational.

A. This confrontation providentially takes place before the prophet Samuel in Ramah (v. 18)

Let’s look first of all at all of the warning signs and sirens that were going off to warn Saul to back off. God was so graciously giving Saul an opportunity to repent.

Look at verse 18: “**So David fled and escaped, and went to Samuel at Ramah...**” We’ll just stop there for a moment. God providentially moved David to run to Samuel, three miles away in Naioth of Ramah. If Saul thought about it, this should have been the first reminder that he was fighting against God. It was Samuel after all who gave the kingdom to Saul in Ramah in chapter 8, and took away the kingdom from Saul in chapter 15, and it says that Samuel stayed in Ramah and did not see Saul’s face any more. Ramah should have been a huge reminder he was no longer the legitimate king. And David, the true heir had gone to Ramah to stand before Samuel just as Saul had done many years before. That’s no coincidence. So it could have switched on a switch of repentance, but instead, it switched on a switch of fear that drove him to do irrational things.

B. Naioth was the school of the prophets (v. 18), and Saul began his kingship with a school of the prophets (10:5,10-12)

Then verse 18 says that Samuel took David to Naioth, a maze of buildings in Ramah where the school of the prophets was located. Now keep in mind that Saul is a professing believer. I think the evidence favors the fact that he was a genuine believer because when he started his kingship it says that God gave him a new heart. That seems like the language of regeneration. At the end of his kingship Samuel tells Saul that Saul will join him in Sheol that day. Samuel was not in hell, so the implication is that Saul joins him in paradise. We’ve talked about the other evidences pro and con in the past.

Now I realize that there is a lot of debate on that subject, but everyone will agree that Saul is at least a professing believer. It’s not like he has thrown the Scriptures out. He goes to church; he reads the Bible; he prays. In

the next chapter he will be keeping a holy festival. So here is the question: Does it make any sense for a professing believer to go against David (who is the Lord's anointed), against Samuel (who wrote portions of Scripture) and against this whole school of prophets? To me it doesn't. That's almost shaking your fist in God's face. By the end of this chapter, Saul will have ignored the prophecies of this entire school of prophets.

Irrational! Irrational! And yet we do it all the time. We sin against the God who loved us and saved when we ignore His prophets, whom He has recorded in the Holy Scriptures. In fact, Peter calls the Bible the "more sure word of prophecy," and yet we ignore it every time we sin. Our behavior is saying, "I don't care what God says; I am going to eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I don't care what the fallout will be; I'm going to eat that fruit."

C. Three overt reminders that Saul is fighting against God Himself, and such resistance is futile (vv. 20-21)

But while those first two warnings were merely *providential* hints that might have stirred up his thinking, these next three reminders are overt and obvious. Saul sends three groups of messengers to kill David (and probably to kill Samuel too). Let's read verses 20-21.

1 Samuel 19:20 Then Saul sent messengers to take David. And when they saw the group of prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as leader over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied.

1 Samuel 19:21 And when Saul was told, he sent other messengers, and they prophesied likewise. Then Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they prophesied also.

God is forcing those three groups of messengers to give God's perspective on the situation. They are captive to God's revelation. They cannot escape from it. They are forced against their will to be the messengers of God's opinion. And yet there is no indication that they repent. Amazing! And there is no indication that Saul repents when he heard what happened. Are you getting a feeling for why I have called this sermon the irrationality of sin?

D. Yet another connection to Samuel, Ramah, and Naioth (v. 22)

The fourth gracious warning is yet another connection of David to Samuel, Ramah, and Naioth in verse 22.

1 Samuel 19:22 Then he also went to Ramah, and came to the great well that is at Sechu. So he asked, and said, “Where *are* Samuel and David?” And *someone* said, “Indeed *they are* at Naioth in Ramah.”

This reminder that David was with Samuel at Naioth in Ramah could have gotten Saul’s guilt going. This is just too coincidental to be a coincidence. But it doesn’t faze him. It makes Saul all the more determined to catch David. But is this any different from pastors who destroy their families by going to a prostitute? No it’s not. And the outcome of both is just as bad.

E. God forcing Saul to prophesy (v. 23)

The fifth gracious warning from God comes in verse 23:

1 Samuel 19:23 So he went there to Naioth in Ramah. Then the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on and prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah.

God overwhelmed Saul, forced Saul himself to repeat God’s words that he had given to the prophets. It’s like he has to write on the blackboard 100 times, “I will not resist God by killing David.” We don’t know what he prophesied, but we know it couldn’t have been happy news, because God was forcing him to prophecy about the situation too.

This is one of the reasons why I say to you parents, if you don’t fall on your knees before God on behalf of your children; if you don’t reach their hearts and apply God’s grace; if all you focus on is outward conformity, going to church, reading and reciting the Scriptures, they could still leave the home in rebellion. Prophecy (or Scripture) by itself will not guarantee changes in our children. Their hearts must be reached by God’s grace. And we can’t do that on our own. Only God can do that, which is why we need to be priests for our families, crying out to God for their salvation, their sanctification, and that any veil that may be over their eyes would be removed. Yes, even believers can have a veil on their eyes that keeps them from seeing straight.

F. God forcing Saul to take off his royal garments (v. 24a – contrast with 18:4)

The sixth warning that comes from God to Saul is given in the first part of verse 24. “**And he also stripped off his clothes and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night.**” In chapter 18:4 Jonathan *voluntarily* takes off his clothing and gives it to David as an expression that he wanted David to be the crown prince. That’s the symbolism. Jonathan was in effect saying, “I don’t want

these clothes. I don't want to be the crown prince. I know that God has called you." That is amazing humility.

In this verse Saul is not *voluntarily* stripping himself of his royal apparel. God *forces* him to. God brings him to abject shame. This is about as obvious as you can get it. When Saul is finally able to quit prophesying and to quickly put his clothes back on, he would have to ask himself, "Why would God do that to me?" And the answer should have been obvious. "Step down from the throne Saul. You are disqualified for office. David is the rightful heir." It is such an obvious rejection of Saul's kingship by God that it is amazing that Saul does not repent. That's why Scripture calls it a mystery. There is a mystery about the depth to which self-deception can go and the power which sin can have upon our lives if we give it reign.

G. The reversal of God's endorsement in 10:5-6,10-13 (v. 24c)

The last warning is given in the last sentence of verse 24: "**Therefore they say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'**" This is an amazing contrast to the first time that the Spirit of God came upon Saul in chapter 10. In that chapter Saul was humble, was given a new heart, and gladly spoke God's Words. So people wondered in chapter 10, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" The implication is that they don't know. But commentaries say that the way this passage is constructed in the Hebrew, people are beginning to negatively question whether he is among the prophets. He had a reputation, but now they are questioning that reputation. How could a true prophet of God go out of his mind, strip off all his clothes, and lie naked, unable to do anything when he is prophesying? It doesn't seem like the way prophets work.

And because the opinion is clearly supposed to be that Saul is not a prophet, some commentators think that the spirit of God who rushed upon Saul must be the evil spirit from the Lord. And it is a possible interpretation. Here are their reasons. They say, 1) First, the Hebrew of "Spirit of God" is identical to the Hebrew in chapter 16:23 where it says that whenever the spirit from God would come upon Saul, David would play and the spirit would leave. So in that case it was clear the evil spirit. So in our passage it could be translated as "spirit *from* God," though "*of* God" is a possibility as well. 2) Second, the other places where the phrase "came upon" is used it always refers to the evil spirit coming upon Saul (16:16,23; 19:9). 3) Third, one of the rules of genuine prophecy is that the spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets if they are true prophets. In other words, they are rational and in control of themselves. They can wait to take their turn to

prophecy. 1 Corinthians 14 speaks about that. It is a sign of a false prophet when they are out of control. 4) Fourth, the answer to the question “Is Saul also among the prophets?” is intended to be answered in the negative. It’s like saying, “How can Saul still claim to be a true prophet if he is behaving irrationally like this?”

So the upshot of that interpretation is that there was false prophesying directly competing with the true prophesying of Samuel and his school of prophets. That is a very intriguing approach to this passage, and it solves some problems. On this interpretation there were different kinds of prophecy, different sources for the prophecy, different methods, and different accompanying signs. And so five of my translations use a small “s” for spirit to make it clear that they believe this was the evil spirit from the LORD.

My response is twofold. Even if Tsumura and other commentators are correct, and it was the evil spirit who was doing these things, the conclusion is still the same. God is sovereign over that evil spirit and made the evil spirit do exactly what God wanted to be done.

But there are good reasons why the vast majority of translations make this the capital-S-Spirit of God. In my library, I have eighteen translations that do so, and I myself tend to lean in that direction. If this second interpretation is correct (and I am not dogmatic on that), then the bizarre behavior that is not normal for prophets could be explained as a sign of God’s rejection of Saul. What those commentators would say is that first, you must distinguish between prophesying and being a prophet. You can prophesy without having the office of a prophet. Even Balaam’s donkey prophesied, but she wasn’t a prophet of God. In fact, God forced *Balaam* to prophesy against his will. He wanted to curse Israel, and God forced Balaam to bless Israel. And Scripture is quite clear that Balaam was working against God (Numb. 31:16; Deut. 23:4-5; Josh 24:10; 2Pet 2:15; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14) and he was a soothsayer (Josh. 13:22) who practiced divination (see ESV of Josh 13:22). God prophesied through Caiaphas the high priest, the very one who crucified Christ. John 11:51 is quite clear on that. So even an unbeliever can prophesy by God’s Holy Spirit, but he is not a prophet of God. John 11:51 says of Caiaphas, “**Now this he did not say on his own; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for that nation.**” So just because a person prophesied by God’s Spirit does not make that person a prophet.

The second thing that they would point out is that this appears to be an *attack* on the messengers and an *attack* upon Saul. The phrase, “came upon,” is a doubling and intensifying of the word “to come upon,” and could mean an overcoming of Saul. It’s like a soldier coming upon someone. So it would make sense that God would not operate with Saul as He would with a friend or a prophet. He’s forcing Saul to prophesy.

The third thing I would say is that Isaiah 44:5 says that God does indeed make fools of false prophets, turns their knowledge into foolishness, and makes their prophets crazy or mad. But that is not a sign of God’s favor, but of his disfavor. It is a sign that he is not a true prophet even though God forces him to speak.

So either way you interpret this passage, it should not be used to justify the laughter movement where people writhe on the floor like snakes, crow like roosters, bark like dogs, howl like hyenas, or lie on the floor comatose for hours. Any irrationality is a sign of God’s judgment and disfavor. I’m not going to settle the question of whether God produced this in Saul or whether the demon did. I think there are good arguments for either side. But Saul had plenty of reasons to wake up and say, “Woah! Maybe I shouldn’t do this.” But he had fallen so far under the grip of sin that he couldn’t see it.

Of course, we know that God doesn’t want us to wag our fingers in shock. He wants us to look inside to see if we are beginning to slide down the same slippery slope. Do we ignore God’s warnings? Do we have willful ignorance? Do we persist in rebellion even when we know we are wrong? Then we have everything it takes to become a Saul. We need to overcome that inner heart of unbelief before it overcomes us.

II. Saul’s decisions are self-destructive that will make him have great losses, yet he makes them anyway. This willful rebellion is irrational.

A. Lost his best military man (v. 18a)

I won’t spend a lot of time on it, but point II says that it is more than simply ignoring God’s warnings. It is ignoring the consequences of sin as well. And the consequences are going to be enormous. Let’s quickly look at them. In verse 18 Saul loses his best military man, David. I know of bosses who will fire their most valuable employee – the one who brings in the most money, simply because of jealousy or feelings of insecurity. But people will hold onto their sin even if it means a bad consequence like that.

B. Lost his reputation (v. 18b)

The next thing that he loses is his reputation. In verse 18 David flees and has to tell Samuel the whole nine yards of what had been happening. Previous to this David appears to have kept his mouth shut and simply sought to be faithful. But what Saul has been doing almost necessitates that David justify himself. And this information is going to become more and more widespread. As Samuel told Saul years before, “be sure your sins will find you out.”

Since I have gotten into ministry, I have seen one pastor after another fall into sin and get removed from the office. Their ignoring of God’s warnings led to ignoring the consequences of sin – including a loss of office and a loss of reputation. But on a lesser scale, all of us do this every time we give in to a sin. It’s important that we think through what we could lose when we sin.

C. Lost wise counsel and a loyal man (contrast v. 18 and 19)

In verses 18 and 19 we see that Saul lost wise counsel. He had already lost the good counsel of Samuel, but now he loses the good counsel of David. David had been willing to tell Saul the truth; to tell him what needed to be said. But from here on out, the population realizes that to be safe around Saul you need to just tell him what he wants to hear. Verse 19: “**Now it was told Saul, saying, ‘Take note, David is at Naioth in Ramah!’**” What did these guys have against David? It is unlikely that they had anything against him. But they knew that if they were going to succeed with Saul they couldn’t give good counsel like David did. And when word such as this spreads, Saul finds himself surrounded by more and more users, and fewer honest and loyal men.

D. Lost his ability to control others (vv. 20-21)

In verses 20-21 we see that Saul lost his ability to control others. This will increasingly become a problem for him in coming chapters.

E. Lost ability to control himself (v. 23)

In verse 23 he loses control of himself. And it is a good reminder that God can take us out any time He chooses. He can control our circumstances, our bodies, our spirits, our minds. We can never out-manuever God.

Another way of saying it is that when we lose control of our flesh and give in to it, we not only have the monster of our flesh against us, and the world against us, and Satan against us; we also have God against us, which

means that nothing will work together for our good. It's the exact opposite of Romans 8:28. It's also the opposite of Romans 8:31. If God is against us, who can be for us? No one can. Everything will conspire against us. And yet men still rebel against God. It's irrational.

F. Lost his royal garments (v. 24a)

In verse 24 he lost his royal garments. We already talked about that.

G. Lost his dignity (v. 24b)

The same verse shows that he lost his dignity.

H. Lost his reputation as a prophet (v. 24c – contrast 10:10-13)

And the last sentence of the chapter shows that he lost his reputation as being a prophet. For him to persist in rebellion in the face of such losses is absolutely irrational.

But brothers and sisters – every time you choose to rebel against God's word, you are just as irrational. Name the sin and you will see what a stupid thing it is to hold onto it. Take the sin of holding a grudge and failing to forgive that person from your heart. Matthew 18 illustrates both Roman numeral I and II with that sin. But it ends the chapter by saying, **“And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”** The torturers that God hands you over to are the demons that can have at you just like they had at Saul. Those demons will turn Romans 8:28 upside down in your life and make your life miserable. But there will be some Christians who will insist that they have a right to hold a grudge against their brother or sister or mother or father, or children or neighbor. They have a right. They don't care about the irrationality of the fact that we won't forgive a one thousand dollar debt of trespasses when God has forgiven us of a billion dollars worth of trespasses. That's irrational. But they don't care. They don't care about the irrationality of having Romans 8:28 turned upside down and giving demons liberty to rampage against us. That bitterness they hold as a treasure in their heart is sadly so precious to them that they are willing to lose everything else rather than give up the bitterness and forgive. It's like Gollum in Lord of the Rings. That ring was poisoning him and endangering him, but he treasured it anyway. And these unforgiving, bitter people will stroke their pet sin and call it precious, all the while being utterly miserable. It's irrational. And if you are a Gollum who is harboring a secret sin, it will

take you over the edge of the precipice and into the molten lava and destroy you if you do not repent of it and cast it away.

I'm not one to quote Napoleon Bonaparte much, but he made a statement that I think is very apropos in describing this passage. He said, "The only conquests which are permanent, and leave no regrets, are our conquests over ourselves." Saul had learned how to control others, but had never learned how to control his temper and his negative thinking. He had learned how to conquer Philistines, but had never learned how to conquer his fear, pride, jealousy, or anger. Rarely did he see and regret his own sin. He had regret in chapter 24 and again in chapter 26, but both times were because of a near death experience. And Saul stands as a warning to those who think all problems are out there and refuse to look at their own heart. I really see this as a final test from God that would give Saul one more opportunity to recognize that he was fighting against God Himself when he fought against David.

III. David's willingness to suffer loss may seem just as irrational, but it is wisdom, and it flows from faith. To gain God's favor is worth losing everything. Yet God also sustained David by granting him everything that he needed.

And our natural mind might object – "Sure Saul lost some things, but he still had the kingdom, the power, and far more enjoyment of life than David did."

"Oh, really? Saul is happy?" And our minds can rationalize, "Well, maybe not totally happy. But Saul is better off than David. David's on the run. How is that a blessing? In fact, it seems as if David has lost more than Saul has lost. David lost his position in the army, lost Saul's favor, lost his wife, lost his earthly possessions, and lost his good friend Jonathan."

You see, this is the way our mind can rationalize with our sin. We think, "It's really not that bad." But if the only perspective you have when you are analyzing a decision is an earthly perspective, then Saul's decision might sometimes make more sense than David's. The wisdom of God is foolishness with man. David's willingness to suffer loss in order to stay faithful may seem just as irrational, but it is not. It is wisdom and it flows from faith.

Why was David running to Ramah? He was running to God and asking for God's wisdom. He ran to God's people. And for a period of time

he basked in the richness of God's revelation. He soaked in God's revelation. Here was a community of prophets who had learned how to draw near to God. David would learn much during this period of time and it would unleash a flurry of prophetic revelation into his life in the upcoming chapters. It ended up being a hidden blessing.

And there is a lot more that could be said about David's stay in Naioth, Ramah. But the chief lesson is that if you have God's favor and His presence, you have everything. Remember earlier it said that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, but the Lord was with David. Romans 8 ends by talking about every imaginable kind of earthly loss, opposition, and persecution and says that none of these things can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. In fact, in all these things, we are more than conquerors.

And our flesh objects, "Yes, but Saul has the kingdom." And Christ answers, **"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul."** God is going to give David the kingdom, riches, and many other things in future chapters, but he wanted David to value Him above everything. When we value God above everything else on earth, God trusts us with more and more things of life. The way Paul worded it is that when you have God, you have everything that God wants you to have. He said, **"...all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."** It takes faith to believe that. But David was walking by faith. And in the upcoming chapters we will see that as he maintained his walk of faith, God kept adding, and adding, and adding to his life. He's not the loser in this chapter; Saul is. He's not the irrational one in this chapter; Saul is. And God asks you this morning: "Which behavior will you imitate?" Will you imitate the irrationality of Saul by holding onto your sin, or will you imitate the rational embracing of God's will that David did?

Conclusion

The famous martyr, Jim Elliott, said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." That seems irrational to the world, but it is the height of rationality. And it is sin, rebellion, and unbelief that is the ultimate irrationality that will land men, women, and children in hell. The call of the Scripture is to be rational, to wake up, to believe and live the Gospel. When we do that, we can say, "If God is for us, who can be against us." Amen. Let's pray

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1 Samuel 19:18-24

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 3-6-2011

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