

“The Spirit at Work”

Introduction: Last week we saw that the die had been cast. The divine decision had been made. Saul had failed to responsibly and faithfully carry out his role as Israel’s king and so God had decided to replace him with David, the shepherd boy, the youngest son of Jesse. As we saw, God sent Samuel to Bethlehem, where Jesse and his sons lived, and there he anointed David to the throne. Accompanying that anointing is the Spirit of the living God who comes forcefully upon David to equip and empower him to carry out his new role.

What we expect next is for God to somehow remove Saul from the throne so that David can begin his reign, maybe instructing David to carry out an “Operation Jerusalem Storm” in order to drive Saul and his and his cabinet far away. What we don’t expect, I don’t think, is for God to send David to the royal court as musical servant to care for Saul, and for David to bring a donkey load of presents for Saul from his father with him! What does any of this have to do with being a king, and with the mission of God?

Do you ever ask that kind of question as you go to work each day, whether work for you is changing a diaper and getting kids off to school on time, or managing an investment portfolio, or teaching a class, or driving a truck, or wielding a hammer and a saw? What does any of that have to do with the mission of God, with what God is up to in this world? If we’re looking at the life of King David in these weeks of Lent to see how he points us to Jesus, the ultimate king, and also to consider how God shapes and forms our hearts to be his people and participate in his mission, then the first thing we want to notice is that the first thing the Spirit does for David is to send him to work, landing him a job in the court of king Saul. Work, God wants us to know, is a very shaping activity and environment. Even more, work is one of the most significant contexts in which God both forms us, and calls us, to be his people. It’s where the Spirit works in us and through us.

I. The Movement of the Spirits

A. Before we think about this, we need to ponder the perplexing movement of the spirits with which our text begins. We’re told that the Holy Spirit has departed from Saul and come upon David, and that an evil spirit, from the LORD, is now tormenting Saul. What’s up with this?! Well, there are things we can say, and things we cannot. We can say that God’s Spirit is the gift God gives to equip his people for what he has called them to do. In the OT, we often see the Spirit given to particular people, at particular times, for particular purposes. Saul himself received such an anointing. But we also see that he refused to pay attention to the Spirit’s leading. As Samuel put it to Saul: “The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission . . . Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD [but] do evil” (1 Sam. 15:17-19)? As Doug Bendel has written, “I *have access* to God’s Spirit no matter what task lies before me today, but I *don’t have to access* his Spirit. I am free to be foolish and try to go it alone” (Untidy Christianity, 20).

B. So the Spirit departs from Saul. This doesn’t speak to the question of whether Saul lost his eternal salvation. I don’t think we can say that, one way or another, from this text. It simply means that God has determined, as a result of Saul’s persistent disobedience, to divest Saul of his divine authority and power and to accomplish his purposes through someone else. As far as the evil spirit that moves in to Saul’s heart, certainly if God leaves, nothing that takes his place can be designated as good. Further, if

God is not the author of evil, I think we can understand this spirit as used by God for discipline and/or judgment upon Saul. God's using the ungodly nations of Babylon and Assyria to bring about the Exile, because of Israel's hard heartedness and idolatry, might be another example of this.

II. Sent by the Spirit to Work

A. What God provides, at the same time, is a means of refreshment and healing for those whom he has disciplined and judged, a role that David is called to play as he goes to work. Saul's attendants believe that when Saul got in a bad place, music would help bring relief. One attendant in particular knew something about David and his musical skill, among his other gifts, and David was brought into the court. He started as a part-time temp, a court musician, but his work was so effective that he received a full-time offer as an armor-bearer.

B. Now, try to imagine what it must have been like for David to start, and continue in, this job. He could've said, "Whoa, I'm the new king. I shouldn't have to lug this guy's armor around. This is beneath me!" Or he could've said, "God, how does being the court musician fit into your plans? I thought you signed me up to be king!" Or he could've said, following those times when Saul's jealousy of David moved Saul not to calm down but to hurl his spear at David while he was playing his harp (18:6-11), "This job is too dangerous. I refuse to work for a boss who doesn't like me!" Instead, with his identity planted in the love of God for him (as we saw last week), David knew he didn't have to prove himself; he could simply trust God and be open to the Spirit's leading.

C. Interesting to note that the same could be said of Jesus. At the baptism of Jesus, Jesus was given the same affirmation of his identity that we said last week David had received: "This is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased" (cf. 2 Sam. 7:13-16). And, as had David, Jesus received an anointing from the Spirit who came to equip him for his upcoming ministry. Finally, the same Spirit that had sent David to work in the difficult court of Saul, where he was forced to contend with an evil spirit and a wild king, sent Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan and forced to contend with wild beasts. Do any of those circumstances even just remotely describe your place of work, where evil lurks, wild beasts run about, and spears fly?!

D. Think of it. If everyone were nice and never naughty, never hurled spears or acted like wild beasts, if Satan was never lurking and you always liked what you did every minute of the day, what kind of shaping would go on? How would you learn to love your enemy, to bless and not curse those who persecuted you, and to grow in kindness, gentleness, humility, and self-control? What better place for this Spirit-implanted fruit to grow than at work?! Could it be that the Spirit, who is known as the Comforter, doesn't always want us to be comfortable, but is forming our hearts so that we can better participate in the mission of God? At work the Spirit is at work in us. What a great place for him to work!

III. Sent as Christ's Ambassadors

A. At the same time, the Spirit is also at work through us, bringing the refreshment of God's grace into our workplace. Let's remember that work comes from God. God, who is himself a worker, has created us to work. As his image bearers, he has called us to be fruitful and multiply, fill and subdue the earth, and rule over it (Ge. 1:28). Our work calls us, in other words, to be good stewards over all that God has given us, and to continue to advance and bring to fruition what he has begun. It's a remarkable call, one that we heard David marvel at in our Call to Worship from Psalm 8. It's what is called the

“cultural mandate,” working as God’s “junior partners” to shape the world around us. “Culture,” writes Andy Crouch, “is what human beings make of the world” (Culture Making, p. 37). Further, if God’s work brings order out of chaos, then it should not surprise us that this might just characterize some of our work as well. To bring order and refreshment and wholeness and well-being is to bring the presence of the Lord. Notice what was true of David: “And the LORD was with him” (v. 18).

B. Scott Cormode, a professor of leadership development at Fuller Seminary, suggests the NT word “ambassadors” to help us think about our work and what God seeks to do through us there. An ambassador is a citizen of one country who goes to live in another with the purpose of building relations between the two, in this case between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. This was the role of the apostles; it is now the role of the church, as Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:16-21). We are to share the shalom—the peace and well-being—that we ourselves have received.

Illustration: Cormode tells the story of a man in his thirties named Michael who managed a large chain drugstore. When asked about his work, Michael didn’t talk about selling things but about people. He talked about the many elderly who came into his store from the retirement community that was next door. He talked about the 19-year-olds who came to work for him who he greatly enjoyed mentoring, teaching them to show up on time, work hard, and care for customers. This man understood his work as a place where God had entrusted various people into his care. It was where he was to bring the presence of the kingdom of God to bear in the kingdom of this world. So, when the big chain that owned his store began treating his staff poorly, cutting hours, benefits, and promotions, Michael was uncomfortable and even upset. But in the long run, as God continued to shape his own heart, he was able to see this as an opportunity to maintain his integrity and to model for his employees the appropriate way to care for his people in the midst of their longings and losses.

C. Although it doesn’t bear directly on work, I was struck in reading Genesis the other day, by a comment Jacob made after waking from a dream in which he was given a vision of a stairway coming down from heaven on which angels were ascending and descending. Jacob exclaimed: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. . . How awesome is this place!” (Ge. 28:16f). Can we look at our workplace in these terms? Can we understand that we’re not just working to fill the time or make a little money to support what really matters in life, but to help bring the world God created to its full potential, and to bring his refreshment to others as we do so? Can we understand that God is in this place called work because we are? Can we trust that as we work, it will grow and shape and form our hearts in the process?

Of course, you can only get so many spears thrown at you before you get discouraged and become in danger of losing heart! When you start to feel that way, look to the encouragement that Paul provided to the slaves in Colossae (3:22-24). Far from affirming the institution of slavery, Paul was giving direction to Christians who found themselves in the midst of very difficult and challenging work environments! Essentially, he reminds all of us who work, slave or free, that it is God who we are ultimately serving through our work, that God sees what we do, that God calls us to excellence at work, and that God will reward us for a job well done.

So may you view this place where the Spirit sends you each day as a place where God meets you and invites you to participate with him in his good and ongoing creative purposes, both in you, and through you.