

Whose Hand shall Prevail?

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much Fiona, Christy and Kat for reading that passage to us. It would be helpful if you keep that passage open as we journey through this evening. But before we get started, let me just pray.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we pray that the words that we have just sung would be true in our lives, that they would be true this evening as we hear your word.

Father, that we would walk by faith and not by sight. As we come to a difficult passage, we pray you would help us and that we would learn from it what you want us to learn. In Jesus' name. Amen.

To start us off this evening, I'm going with a little bit of a stranger introduction. And I'd like you, instead of having a nice picture on the PowerPoint, I'd like you to hold up your hand in front of your face for me.

So if everyone just has a wee look at their hand. There you go. The majority of you are joining in. That's always good. We use our hands on a daily basis, don't we?

[1 : 03] But how often do we really think about them? These hands can be tools both for good and for bad. So how many of you... You can put your hands down now if you will.

So how many of you have used your hands to wipe away the tear from a child's face? And with that same hand have smacked a table in frustration or anger?

How many of you have used your hand to write a love letter? And how many of you have used the same hand to write that angry email to a work colleague?

Our hands can be stretched out to welcome friends and family members into the warmth of our home. Or they can be weapons that can turn people away in pain.

These hands can both harm and heal. They can hurt and they can comfort. They can build up or they can destroy. And that's just our hands.

[2 : 05] This evening in 1 Samuel chapter 23, I wonder if you noticed as Kat was reading to us the recurring word hand or hands. It's as if there's a power play going on.

Saul thinks that David is in his hands. He's got him in his grasp. That he's nearly one. But God does not deliver David into Saul's hand, the passage says.

So in this whole power play, the question that I want us to think about this evening is whose hand will prevail? As we break into this next installment of the fugitive narrative of David's life in 1 Samuel, we've seen David on the run.

He's fleeing from place to place for his life. And we've seen Saul, the king of Israel, slaughter priests and a whole town just to get his enemy. Saul has completely lost it.

David, as God's anointed king, is facing hostility from God's enemies. And I'm sure that time and time again in this whole period in David's life, he was thinking, whose hand will prevail?

[3 : 18] Is God really going to win? Will Saul's hand tighten his grip around me or will God deliver me by his mighty hand? Whose hand will prevail?

But as we will see this evening, even though Saul seems so close and seems to have David on the ropes, God's hand is working and nothing will prevail against it.

God's hand will prevail. And in this passage, we see three things that the hand of God is doing. And the first thing that we see in this passage is the helping hand of God.

In 1 Samuel 23, verses 1 to 14, the helping hand of God. So in the beginning of chapter 23, we find David and his motley crew of the distressed, the debtors and the discontent outcasts of Israel hiding in a forest.

And in verse 1, David is told that the Philistines are looting the threshing floors of Kyla, a town around five miles away from where he currently is.

[4 : 24] Now a threshing floor is a place usually outside the town where grain was stored. And during harvest time, everyone would be there, separating the chaff from the grain. And so it is the ideal place to attack because you'd get all the benefits of harvest without all the work.

So the Philistines were smart. That is exactly what they were doing. But what would you expect David to do at this moment? Now remember, he has no obligation to the people of this town. He doesn't need to put his neck on the line. He's got the king of Israel on his heels with a massive army, I might add. Everything in this situation is screaming out, David, don't even think about it. Go home, put your feet up. Let Saul deal with his own mess. But notice what he does in verse 2. David hears about the plight of his countrymen.

And his reaction is not hot anger. It's not rage. It's not a battle cry. No, his first reaction is to turn to God. Verse 2 says, David's priority since defeating Goliath in 1 Samuel chapter 17 has been fighting with the Philistines.

[5 : 45] And interestingly, that's actually what Saul was commanded to do by God in chapter 9 verse 16. So David is doing the job that the king should be doing. But instead of running into battle, David turns to God.

Now how often do we wait and inquire of God and his word before we act? Before we attack others who have wronged us?

I know my first gut reaction is to react. But what our transformed lives should lead us to do is to inquire of God and his word.

So David is placing himself under the authority and protection of God. He's under God's authority because he is admitting that he is nothing but a tool in God's hand.

And he's putting himself under God's protection because he only has 600 of Israel's rejects with him. He does not have a mighty army. If he goes against the Philistines and he wins, then there is no doubt on earth that God has won the victory for him.

[7 : 01] Humanly speaking, this is a no-brainer. David, go home. Chill out. But he inquires of the Lord and God helps David. In verse 2, God says, Go attack the Philistines and save Kyla.

Now we can't jump over this verse without noticing the significance of this event. God has spoken to David. This is the first time that God has spoken to David in the book so far.

God is revealing his will to his king for his people. Go and save them, God says. And understandably, David's men are afraid in verse 3.

So David asks God again. And in verse 4, God says, Go down to Kyla, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand. God says, Go, David.

The battle is already won. The victory is mine. You and your weak army will win, but not by your strength. Not by your skill, but by my helping hand.

[8 : 11] So David and his reject army win and defeat the Philistines. God's hand had been in this battle, helping and fighting for David. But just like every good story, after the triumph of an underdog, comes a devastating event.

Saul gets wind of David's whereabouts. And so he jumps to the worst conclusion possible. In verse 7, he says, God has delivered him into my hands.

For David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars. What an absolute fool. The man who should be sitting on the throne and ruling in righteousness and wisdom has become the court jester.

He's become the clown. In his hatred for David, he completely bypasses God. He isn't thinking that God has been working in David's life.

That God has been helping him and defending him. No, he is completely blind to it all. So do you see the difference between David and Saul? David sees his enemy and he inquires of what God's will is and he acts upon it.

[9 : 32] Saul has no thought for God's will. But simply presumes that he is blameless and that God is on his side. Somehow Saul thinks that God is pleased with him, even though he has no regard for his people.

Saul, as king, should have been the one to protect Kyla, to save the town from the Philistines, but he is not fit to be king. And nor is he the right king.

And so the real king steps in and accomplishes God's will. So Saul calls an army to go and get David in verse 8. But this is not a thank you party.

This is not a parade with presents and flowers, but this is a force equipped with swords and hatred, with the only goal in mind to attack, capture and kill David.

So what does David do? Well, again, in verse 10, he turns to God. He prays, Lord God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Kyla and destroy the town on account of me.

[10:43] Will the citizens of Kyla surrender me to him? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard? Lord God of Israel, tell your servant. So God does.

God tells David that the town will hand him over to Saul. And so David and his 600 men leave in verse 13, and they go from place to place, running for their lives.

But two things to notice about this little event in the life of David. The first is the absolute tyranny of Saul. The people of Kyla are so afraid of this king that they're willing to hand David over to him. They're happy to sell out the man who's just put his life on the line for them. But the second thing to notice is how God is helping David. God has helped David by giving him and his 600 men victory. He has protected them and warned them of the town's intentions, giving them time to flee. So the unrighteous king has lost the plot. The righteous king is being obedient and relying on God, and the true and ultimate king of the universe is ruling over this whole situation, helping his servant David.

[12:03] Look at the end of verse 14. God did not give David into his hand. God's helping hand is at work in David's life.

Now people can look at this passage and use it as a justification for a desire to hear the voice of God directing them in everything they do. But the truth is that God has already spoken and revealed himself to us in his words.

The question is, in our times of need, where do we run? Do we run and hide wishing for the comfort of an easy life?

Or when we face opposition, do we run to God? Our first response should be to cry out to God in prayer and earnestly seek his will by reading his word, by speaking to his people, and then actively doing something about it.

But how often are we like Saul? How often don't we take God's word into account and we just live our lives according to our own wishes and our own desires?

[13:19] Sometimes God's helping hand is very visible in our life, and sometimes he completely turns situations around and lifts us out of difficult circumstances. But on the most part, God keeps us in our difficult places and he helps us through them.

He helps us by giving us endurance, patience, and a greater reliance on him. God is helping you because in the future you'll look back and you will see God's goodness in your suffering.

Seeing the helping hand of God in our lives should mean that as Christians we have the attitude of David, attitudes of humility, of service, of complete dependence and obedience to God.

Our lives should be marked by a complete surrendering to God's will. God's helping hand is at work in our lives all the time.

And seeing him at work in our lives, both in the day to day and through the work of Jesus Christ, we should be able to wholeheartedly say, Lord, take my life and let it be consecrated to thee.

[14:35] It is yours, not mine. So as David is on the run, as he is fleeing for his life, we see the helping hand of God.

And the second thing that we see in this passage is the strengthening hand of God. The strengthening hand of God in verses 15 to 18. So David is now in the desert of Ziph and he knows that Saul is searching high and low for him.

He's got nowhere to hide. Saul is convinced of David's treachery and determined that killing him is God's will. But put yourself in David's shoes for a second.

He's been on the run for a while now. He's been imprisoned and he's escaped. He's hidden in caves with 400 men. He's been as low as can be from the palace courts to a cave in the middle of nowhere.

But also remember that he has been anointed king over Israel. And he started off his life of running as one man, as an individual.

[15:45] And now he has 600 men with him. David is growing in popularity. He saved a town from being killed by the Philistines, but he is still on the run.

Can you imagine how discouraged he is at this stage? Everything in his life seems to be going wrong. He knows where God has promised he will be.

He's been seeking to live out his life obediently and according to God's will, but nothing is going his way. I'm sure he was thinking, God, when are you going to give me a break?

And in verse 16, we see a daring but caring move from Jonathan. See, he went to David and it says that Jonathan helped him find strength in God.

What a godly friend Jonathan is. He put his own life on the line to go and encourage his friend, but not just with a pat on the back or a nice little motivational speech.

[16:48] Jonathan is pointing David to God, pointing to the source of all strength, pointing him to the only one who can sustain him now in the time of his fear.

In verse 17, Jonathan says, Jonathan is strengthening David by reiterating the promises of God to him that he will be king.

God is strengthening David through Jonathan. Now here we get a little glimpse into how deep this friendship really is. Jonathan knows exactly where David is and how to find him.

And yet he doesn't tell his own dad. And he puts his life on the line to go and encourage David. And he says to David, I will be second to you.

So as the prince of Israel, Jonathan is relinquishing his place of authority and power and bowing down to God's will. Jonathan is a true friend.

[18:09] When was the last time that you saw a fellow Christian struggling and you encouraged them by pointing them to God? All too often, I think we casually say, I'm praying for you.

Or we pull a verse out of context and we quote it and we think that we've somehow helped that person. And those are good things to do, to pray for people and to tell verses that will encourage them.

But do you know what's helped me most in my times of pain and suffering and despair? Having a fellow believer come alongside me, weep and mourn with me, but ultimately pointing me to the glorious truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The world will tell us that we cannot help people, but that is a lie. Because as Christians, we can point people to the only source of peace, to the only source of assurance, God, that is how God can use you and can use me to strengthen people.

David isn't only strengthened by having a friend in Jonathan, but much more than that, David is strengthened by Jonathan's certainty that God is faithful and that his promises will be fulfilled.

[19:29] Jonathan is certain that God's plan will prevail, that God's hand will prevail. And he knows that David's life is in God's hand.

God uses people to strengthen people. Now it's so easy, isn't it, to walk into church on a Sunday morning or to walk into a small group during the week and to moan, to complain about how busy we are or how hard work is or how difficult the kids are at this moment in time.

And those are things that we should be praying for. Absolutely. But so often I think we moan instead of praying. How different would our church life be if instead of coming to moan, we turned up and asked the question, how can we encourage people?

How different would our church life be if instead of showing up and consuming everything we can, instead of looking out for our own interests, our own wishes, our own desires, but we actually came with a question in mind, how can I build up my brother and sister in Christ today?

I can tell you the difference. Our church would be transformed. People would be happier and more willing to serve and care for others. But the thing that makes this change, this transformation, is not behavior modification.

[21:01] Because if we think that, then we've missed the point. It is not simply putting on your Sunday best and smiling until your cheeks hurt. No. It is walking into a room with fellow broken brothers and sisters of Christ and pointing them to the one place where they can find real strength, lasting certain hope and endurance through struggles and peace that passes all understanding.

So the question we should ask when we prepare to go to any meeting, whether that's Sundays, small group, or whether that's coffee with a friend or family member, the question is, how can I best point this person to the promises of God?

How might God use me to strengthen this individual? How can I best serve this person so that they are absolutely overwhelmed by God's goodness?

How can I best point this person to see the sheer beauty of the gospel? God uses people to strengthen people. That is what Jonathan did.

That is how God could be working for you and that is how God could be working through you. What a privilege it is that God would see fit to use us to be instruments in his hand to strengthen people. [22 : 25] So here's a little practical challenge for you. After our service this evening, turn to the person next to you.

Ask them how you can pray for them. Encourage them and then pray together. Nothing out there, nothing weird, nothing too strange for a Sunday evening.

It'll add five minutes to our Sunday evening service, but it will be a huge encouragement to your fellow brother and sister sitting next to you.

That is how God can use you to strengthen others and that is how God can strengthen you. The third thing and final thing that we see in this passage is the mighty hand of God.

Verses 19 to 29, the mighty hand of God. So imagine for a second how Saul is feeling. He's been chasing David down for absolutely ages.

[23 : 29] But each time David manages to escape his grip. And so you can imagine his delight as the citizens of, as the Ziphites come to him in verse 19 and tell him exactly where David is hiding.

He thinks his lucky day has come. In verse 20, they say, now your majesty, come down whenever it pleases you to do so and we will be responsible for giving him into your hands.

Now, Saul couldn't have asked for any better subjects, could he? These men are happily bowing low and kissing the ring of a treacherous ruler. Saul thinks that his hand will prevail and that he will finally get his grip around David's throat.

The scales, he's thinking, are finally tipped in my favor. And so he responds in verses 21 to 23, saying, the Lord bless you for your concern for me.

Go and get more information. Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty.

[24 : 40] Find out about all the hiding places he uses and come back to me with definite information. Then I will go with you. If he is in the area, I will track him down among all the clans of Judah.

Do you notice something about his response? He is absolutely paranoid. He starts off with a blessing on the Ziphites, which is really ironic because he's using God's name to bless a people who are betraying God's anointed king.

And then he gives a kind of arrogant statement. Oh, you're doing all this for little old me. And he becomes more and more paranoid and more concerned about the minute details of the plan and the strategy.

He's asking for more information. He wants to know exactly where David moves, how many steps he has done that day and how many people he has seen. It's like the scenes in those police movies where they're staking out a suspect.

They lie in hiding, waiting to get all the dirt that they need. Patiently taking pictures, usually got a big mind map on the wall. Checking faces to find that one weak link that will crack the case.

[26 : 03] And that is what Saul wants. But he doesn't just want mug shots or pictures. He wants full-blown thick folders on everyone who is around David.

Why? Because the end of verse 22, Saul says, they tell me he is very crafty. Again, Saul, how foolish are you?

He is attributing David's success to skill and cunning. The only reason David is still in the wind is because God's hand is protecting and strengthening him.

God's hand is so mighty that all the forces of Israel could descend and nothing could touch David. God is working. So Saul is absolutely paranoid and he wants more information but notice how his speech ends in verse 23.

I will track him down among all the clans of Judah. So much pride but no mention of prayer.

[27 : 12] No desire to seek God. No inkling of any desire to do God's will. Saul's priority is himself. King Saul is proud because he sees the forces that are behind him and he thinks that his whole army will bring David to his knees but he forgets who is standing behind David.

David has the great God of the universe who is on his side. The God who speaks and it happens. The God who parts the sea for his people to be free. The God who does the impossible and the God who is faithful to every single one of his promises.

God's mighty hand is on David and Saul's puny army in comparison can do absolutely nothing about it. And so in verses 24 to 26 we see the ultimate cat and mouse chase.

Saul is on David's heels and these short verses are packed with so much tension. So if this were a movie you could imagine the scary music getting louder and louder as you read. Ramping up the intensity as you see David nearly being caught. And then in verse 26 the tension is almost so unbearable that you're on the edge of your seat. Saul is on one side of the mountain David on the other.

[28 : 36] And it's at this point you grab the pillow that's on the couch next to you because you can't bear seeing David captured, humiliated and killed. But just as the tension is at its highest in verse 27 a messenger came to Saul saying come quickly the Philistines are raiding the land.

And then Saul broke off his pursuit of David and went to meet the Philistines. Now we can read this blindly and think that this is nothing but a coincidence.

Or we can read this with an understanding of who our great God is and how mighty he is and what he does for his people he delivers them from trouble and nothing not even an army can thwart his plans.

God's mighty hand is protecting his servant. God's hand will always prevail. Now you might be sitting there thinking well that all sounds nice but I don't feel it.

as we walk out of this building this evening we step into a world that is holding its fist against us in hostility. A world that despises us for what we believe and who we serve.

[29 : 54] How on earth can God be working in all of that? How can God's mighty hand be at work if Christians all over the world are suffering and being persecuted for their faith?

how can God be at work in my life if everything around me is screaming the exact opposite? Well God is working because he is building his church.

He is calling people to himself and nothing not even the gates of hell will prevail against it. As Christians we've been warned that we will suffer for Jesus but we see that the suffering that we face now for following God's anointed king the king Jesus is preparing us for an eternity with him.

The promise far outweighs the pain. This whole chapter and how God has been working in it is so relevant for us today because we see God doing the same things in our lives.

lives. So God the creator of this world the father who lovingly gave life to humanity has watched us descend into the depths of despair and sin and rebellion against him but instead of walking away instead of turning his back he looked at us struggling in the depths of despair and he helped but not just by throwing us a lifeline not just by giving us a hand out of the muck no he helped by stepping into our mess God in the flesh stepped into our ruin and mess and he became one of us why?

[31 : 47] So that we can be reconciled to God brought back into a right relationship with him and taken from being a wretch under God's wrath to being sons and daughters clothed in royalty God makes the impossible possible Jesus took our punishment and brought us to God and he is strengthening us daily because we are not alone Jesus promised his disciples that once he left he would send a comforter and that person is the Holy Spirit who dwells within every Christian and is making us more into the image and likeness of Jesus we are constantly being strengthened because as Christians we are being transformed from the inside out and being pointed to the goodness the glory and the majesty of our great and mighty God now if this is not the act of an all powerful all loving

God then I do not know what is Jesus going to the cross carrying all of our sin and shame being in darkness and torment in our place and finishing the payment with the cry it is finished that is the mightiest work that this world will ever see but that is not the end of the story because God raised Jesus from the dead and has promised his return and until that day until the whole church will gather as one body before the throne of God and sing holy holy holy holy as the Lord God almighty we have a mission we have a message to proclaim and the message is that God is still at work and that God's hand will prevail that is the message that we walk out of here with this evening victory belongs to our God God's hand will and has prevailed let's pray together father in our suffering in our pain in our hurt and in our broken lives would you help us in our discouragements in our doubts in our questions would you strengthen us and would you help us strengthen others and in the time where we feel down and out where we feel on the ropes and we feel that the world is winning would your mighty hand be at work in us and would you put people around us who point us to your goodness people who remind us of the good news of the gospel that

Jesus Christ has won that nothing on earth will stop your plan and that your church is being built we ask this for your fame and your fame alone in Jesus holy and precious name amen amen