

A Decaying Heart (David, Pt.3)

[read through slides 1-5 with sound on]

[slide 6, blank] One of the saddest things in the world is to see something that was once strong and vibrant fall into a state of decay.

Take for example Nortel. At its height, Nortel, a multi-national telecommunications company,

accounted for more than a third of the total valuation of all the companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange, employing 94,500 people worldwide.

Deb and I were stationed in Ottawa when the telecom bubble of the late 1990's burst in 2000.

Nortel became one of the most spectacular casualties. Their stock price plunged from \$124 per share to 47 cents.

When Nortel's stock crashed, it took with it a wide swath of Canadian investors and pension funds [some of whom were in our corps] and left 60,000 Nortel employees unemployed.

Here's another example of falling into a state of decay. I'm 63 years old. Sometimes I look at my body in the mirror [pose as if in front of a mirror]...

In its day... well actually it never really had a day, but you know what I'm talking about – hearing loss, weight gain, worsening vision, arthritic joints, and the list goes on.

It's a very painful thing to watch something decay because you remember what it once was.

But of all forms of decay the saddest is the decay of the human heart.

Can you think of someone who had a great start in the X'n faith then, over time, drifted away from God and allowed their heart, their spirit to decay?

[slide 7] David has a front row seat to watch that process of decay in a man named Saul. Saul starts so well.

In 1 Sam. 10.24 Samuel says about Saul, "Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people."

That's a rare and extraordinary phrase used only a few times in Scripture and it's used as a high compliment: "There is no one like him among all the people."

In what ways is there no one like him? Well, for one thing, Saul has a sense of *humility* about himself.

When Saul finds out he is going to be anointed king his response in 9.21 is,

"But I'm from the smallest tribe of Israel, and my clan is the smallest in the tribe. Why do you honour me?"

Another way in which there is no one like him is that Saul has a gracious, noble spirit. When first anointed king some Israelites oppose him in 10.27.

But after a battle in which he defeats their enemies, morale goes sky high. The people then ask Samuel in 11.12,

"Where are those people opposed to Saul's becoming king? Bring these men to us, and we will put them to death."

But Saul replies in 11.13, "No. No one shall be put to death today, for today the Lord has rescued Israel."

He's 30 years old when he's anointed king. He's tall, dark, and handsome, and a great warrior. But he is also humble, gracious, and noble.

He loves the Lord God and the future looks bright for him and for Israel. But as he nears the end of his 42 year reign he is tormented in mind and driven mad with jealousy.

In short, he becomes just a shell of what he had once been.

[slide 8, blank] I look at all the promise in him at the start of his reign, and then at his tragic end, and wonder, how does this happen? How does a life deteriorate, decay so badly?

The story of Saul is potentially the story of each one of us. So I want to be as clear as I can on what the decay of the human heart, the human spirit looks like and how we can avoid it with all the strength God provides us.

We begin in 1 Sam. 15 and work our way through the book.

What then, is the 1st way to avoid the decay of the human spirit? [slide 9]

Don't Tolerate Disobedience Toward God.

This is what Saul does not do. Instead, he tolerates disobedience toward God. Chapter 15 is just one of several examples.

There we read that Saul and his army are at war with the Amalekites.

Samuel tells Saul in v.2f, "This is what the Lord Almighty says," and I'm paraphrasing...

This enemy is so wicked that everything is to be completely destroyed including livestock. Got it, Saul?"

"Got it."

"What's to be destroyed?"

"Everything."

Saul wins the battle, but he opts to keep all the choicest livestock. He is unwilling to destroy them.

Why? Is it his pride, selfishness, and greed that get in the way of doing what he's been told to do?

Samuel meets Saul again and Saul says in v.13: "The Lord bless you [Samuel]! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."

But Samuel asks in v.14, again my paraphrase, “Oh ya? Then what’s that noise I hear? Sounds like sheep bleating and cattle mooing.”

“Oh,” Saul says, “You mean those sheep and cattle. Well, uh..., we spared only the best livestock so that we could, uh... sacrifice them to the Lord.

Yeah, that’s the ticket, they are to be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord.”

Sounds reasonable, but Samuel doesn’t buy what Saul is selling. He’s just making excuses [lies really] to cover up his own disobedience.

“What did the Lord tell you to do Saul? You were to totally destroy everything. Everything means everything.”

Saul tolerates disobedience toward God. He doesn’t come clean and confess, and it advances the process of decay in his heart, in his life.

Samuel then utters words that are so important for us to hear in v.22, “To obey is better than sacrifice.”

So what about us? Are there any areas in our life where we’re tolerating disobedience toward God?

I want to challenge you, as I do myself, that if there is any disobedience happening in some area of your life,

you don’t let it go unchecked; you don’t cloak it in pious-sounding rationalizations.

Because Saul tolerates disobedience and doesn’t confess it and repent of it, it leads him on a path of decay.

The same can happen to us. So don’t allow it to happen. Don’t let disobedience go unchecked.

Humble yourself before God and ask him to search your heart; to see if there is any way in which you are tolerating disobedience him toward him.

If there is, confess it to him, repent of it, and surrender your will to his.

What then, is the 2nd way to avoid the decay of the human heart? [slide 10]

Don't Tolerate A Loss Of Intimacy With God.

Again, this is what Saul does not do. Instead, he tolerates a loss of intimacy with God. He learns to live with the fact that there's no longer any closeness in his r'ship with God.

Go to 16.14. There we read that "the Spirit of the Lord has departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord torments him."

Now this is a troubling text. God's Spirit has departed from Saul.

Saul, by his disobedience and lack of repentance, has alienated himself from God; he no longer has any intimacy or closeness in his r'ship with God.

But what does it mean that God sent an evil spirit to torment Saul?

There are different thoughts about this. Some say it means that God allows a demon to torment Saul.

Another option, the one I prefer, has to do with the fact that in the Hebrew language, 'evil spirit' can also be translated as a "distressing spirit,"

the idea being that God allows Saul to experience deep emotional distress in the hopes that he will yet repent and return to him even though his kingship is all but over.

However you understand it, as a result of Saul's affliction, he suffers from violent mood swings, delusional paranoia, and uncontrollable fits of rage.

And so Saul's attendants, believe, v.16, that music will make him feel better.

Why did they believe this? It goes back to the earliest archaeological records which show that the ancients believed that music soothed the passions and healed mental disorders.

And so, v.18, one of Saul's servants recommends David. He's a skilled musician.

And sure enough, whenever David plays his lyre, we are told in v.23, relief comes to Saul and he feels better... at least temporarily.

When our kids first started learning to play an instrument I never once said to them,

"Come play your horn to soothe my troubled spirit," because they were not yet accomplished players. But David is.

What the ancients believed, several modern studies back up - that music has enormous healing power.

Music is such a wonderful gift. It can enable the heart to connect to God like nothing else.

Driving down the street the other week I pulled up to a guy in another vehicle who must have been listening to an Army band on CD.

Have you ever seen somebody really enthused about the music they're listening to when they're in their car and they don't think anybody is looking?

This guy was singing at the top of his lungs, waving his arm like a Band master with a baton, and rocking back and forth to the music.

I've never seen Danny Lai move to the music so much before!

Music is a wonderful gift and a very important part of our spiritual growth and development.

But in this story, it seems to me that Saul is using music to avoid facing the troubling issues of his life.

Saul wants relief from feeling so bad. But what he really needs to do is to examine his heart,

to discover that it is his lack of intimacy with God, caused by his disobedience, that is creating his pain in the first place.

As Saul continues down his pathway of personal decay, eventually even David's musical skills no longer make Saul feel better.

So much for music therapy - perhaps David was playing country!

Maybe you are troubled, distressed in spirit, and maybe you've been looking for relief to feel better.

And so when the distress increases you work a little harder, drink a little more, go out and shop a lot, or you turn on some music to try to feel better.

Instead of doing those things, why not humble yourself before God and say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

Ask him, "Lord, am I tolerating a loss of intimacy with you?"

Have the courage to do what Saul did not do - to spend some time alone with God, to face whatever is troubling your heart and to move back towards intimacy with God.

Saul starts out so well but then the process of decay sets in as he tolerates not only disobedience toward God but also a lack of intimacy with God.

What then, is the 3rd way to avoid the decay of the human heart? [slide 11]

Don't Tolerate Poisoned Relationships.

Does Saul tolerate poisoned relationships? By now you can guess he does. Relationships become poisoned by jealousy. Turn to 1 Sam. 18. I want to look at three verses.

There's one word that keeps cropping up in each of these verses that describes how people feel about David. See if you can pick what that one word is.

18.1: "After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he *loved* him as himself."

v.16: "But all Israel and Judah *loved* David."

v.20: "Now Saul's daughter [Me-kawl'] was in *love* with David."

What's the one word that keeps cropping up in those verses? *Love*. Everybody loves David. And Saul sees that.

Then there's another word that occurs in three different verses about how David's career is going. See if you can pick out the one word.

18.5: "Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so *successfully* that Saul gave him a high rank in the army."

v.15: "When Saul saw how *successful* [David] was, Saul was afraid of him."

v.30: "The Philistine commanders continued to go out to battle, and as often as they did, David met with more *success* than the rest of Saul's officers, and his name became well known."

What's the one word that describes how David's career is going? *Successful*.

Saul sees that too. He sees that the people love David, and he sees that God is blessing David with one success after another.

Now look at v.6ff. "When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine [Goliath],

the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres.

As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

When Saul hears this it makes him very angry; their singing infuriates him.

"And [so] from that time on," we read in v.9, "Saul kept a jealous eye on David."

Saul's relationship with David is marked by jealousy. And jealousy is toxic; it poisons relationships.

Saul sees David, who is loved by the people, by his son, and by his daughter, enjoying one success after another because the Lord is with David and has left him, and Saul can't stand it.

His relationship with David becomes poisoned by jealousy. And jealousy is toxic.

His jealousy turns to hatred. In 18.10, he picks up his spear and hurls it at David because, in his twisted, tormented mind,

he knows David will succeed him on the throne and that the Lord has rejected him as king.

When you get to this phase of decay in your heart you may end up throwing spears at people.

Have you ever known people in church who were so jealous of someone that they would throw spears of anger towards them?

When that happens, it makes a mockery out of the unity of the Body of Christ, a unity for which Jesus died. This must not happen.

If you are jealous of another person - especially a brother or sister in Christ - you do whatever you have to do to heal that relationship before it becomes toxic.

You ask God: Search me, O God, and know my heart... see if there is any offensive way in me.

Follow that up by getting wise counsel from a trusted Christian friend or from a Christian counsellor if need be.

But get your heart right towards that person. Don't tolerate poisoned relationships.

What then, is the 4th way to avoid the decay of the human heart? [slide 12]

Don't Tolerate A Violation Of Your Core Values.

What do you think Saul does? He ends up tolerating a violation his core values. Look at 1 Sam. 28.3.

"Now Samuel is dead, and all Israel has mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ra-mah'.

Saul has expelled the mediums and spiritists [necromancers] from the land as the Law of Moses, the Torah, absolutely prohibits any Israelite from consulting one.

In fact, we read in Lev. 20.6 that the Lord says, "I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists..."

Now the Philistines assemble their forces once again to fight against Israel. They set up camp at Shoo-name', v.4, while Saul gathers all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa.

When Saul sees the Philistine army, v.5, he is afraid; terror fills his heart.

He inquires of the LORD, but the LORD does not answer him by dreams or Oo-reem' [the casting of sacred lots or dice] or the prophets."

This is one of the darkest moments in Saul's life. He chooses to violate one of the most serious prohibitions in the OT, which is also one of the core values he has for his kingdom.

In his anxiety and fear, Saul says to his attendants, v.7, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her."

“There is one in Endor, they say” [which is behind enemy lines].

So Saul disguises himself, putting on other clothes, and at night, he and two men sneak behind enemy lines to seek out this woman.

His disobedience toward God, his lack of intimacy with God, his jealousy and hatred of David,

have brought him to the place where he’s now desperate for help.

We now see the full extent of Saul’s decaying heart.

This same king who has outlawed mediums and necromancers, according to the LORD’s own word, now consults one himself. He violates his own core values.

If he can’t get the information he needs from God to win the war against the Philistines, he’ll go to a medium in Endor to get it.

Saul reaches rock bottom in the decay of his heart.

From the medium’s description of the spirit, Saul knows its Samuel, v.14, and bows down with his face to the ground.

But it turns out that Samuel, who was a fairly feisty, cantankerous curmudgeon in life, has not been mellowed by death at all.

He pronounces in death what he has already told Saul many times in life in vs.16-19; that God’s judgement is upon him and that tomorrow Saul and his sons will die.

Saul violates his core values; the values he staked his kingdom on. His rule as king is finished.

The kingdom will be torn away from him and given to David.

[slide 13, blank] This man who had been chosen by God, anointed by Samuel, acclaimed by the people, and was so full of promise,

is now a desperate, fear-filled, half-crazed wreck.

In our final glimpse of his life in 1 Sam. 31, Saul, a defeated man, falls on his own sword.

Once we reach this phase of decay in our hearts, we too will violate the very values we hold dear.

Think of the gifted pastor who champions the family until the day comes when he betrays his wife and children and leaves them.

His life is now a shell of what it might have been.

Think of the woman with a bitter spirit who used to say that the church was the most important part of her life.

But she becomes so full of jealousy that it poisons her relationships.

And she ends up damaging and then deserting the church community she said she was going to give her life to.

Think of people who start out claiming to follow Jesus but their hearts become dark, cold and sour, and they end up becoming very judgmental people.

I don't want to end up like that and I don't think you do either.

When Samuel dies, we're told in 1 Sam. 25 that all Israel wept for him.

They wept because of all that Samuel had become – a man of incredible devotion to God, a man of honesty, courage, and boundless love for all the people.

They wept tears of gratitude for him because of who he was.

When Saul dies, David commands all of Israel to weep in 2 Sam. 1. Only this is a different type of tears.

This time the people weep tears of regret because of who Saul might have become but didn't.

When you die will it be an occasion for tears of gratitude or tears of regret?

Of all the forms of decay this world knows, the very saddest is the decay of the human heart.

Don't let that happen to you. Begin by praying to the Lord, "Search me, O God, and know my heart today." Let's sing those words together as our prayer [CH 657].