

Part 16

1 Samuel 23–24

David the Deliverer

In the second chapter of his book *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington wrote, “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.” Measured by this standard—and it’s a valid one—David was a very successful man. For ten years he was considered an outlaw, yet he fought the Lord’s battles and delivered Israel from her enemies. He lived with his faithful men in the forsaken places of the land and often had to flee for his life, yet he knew that the Lord would finally deliver him and give him the promised throne. David’s coronation was not only important to the people of Israel; it was important to all the people of God of every age. For out of David’s family the Redeemer would ultimately come, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, the Son of God.

1. David delivers Keilah from the Philistines. (1 Sam. 23:1–6)

Keilah was a border town in Judah, about twelve miles from the Philistine city of Gath and some ten miles west of the forest of Hereth where David and his men were camping (22:5). Situated that close to the enemy, Keilah was extremely vulnerable, especially during the harvest season when the Philistine army was searching for food. Had King Saul been concerned about defending his people instead, he would have sent a detachment of soldiers to protect Keilah, but he was obsessed with finding David and killing him.

The spies of both David and Saul were active in the land, and David’s spies reported that the Philistines were attacking Keilah. David paused to determine the will of God, a practice every leader needs to imitate, for it’s easy for our own personal interests to get in the way of God’s will. How did David discover God’s will when Abiathar the priest hadn’t yet arrived in the camp? (23:6) The prophet Gad was with David (22:5), and it’s likely that he prayed to the Lord for direction. Once Abiathar arrived with the ephod, David had him inquire of the Lord when there were important decisions to make (v. 9; 25:32; 26:11, 23).

Once David got the go-ahead signal from the Lord, he mobilized his men, but they weren’t too enthusiastic about his plans. It was acceptable to fight the Philistines, Israel’s long-time enemies, but they didn’t want to fight their own Jewish brothers. What if Saul turned against David and his men? The band of 600 men would then be caught between two armies! Unwilling to impose his own ideas on his men, David sought the Lord’s will a second time, and once again he was told to go rescue the people of Keilah. It wasn’t David’s unbelief that created the problem, because he had faith in the Lord, but the fear in the hearts of his men made them unprepared for battle.

God more than kept His promise because He not only helped David slaughter the invading Philistines but also take a great amount of spoil from them. David moved into Keilah, which was a walled city, and it was there that Abiathar went when he fled from Nob carrying the precious ephod (22:20–23; 23:6). But Saul’s spies were at work and learned that David was now in Keilah, a walled city with gates. Saul told his troops they were going to Keilah to rescue the city, but his real purpose was to capture David, and he was certain that David could not escape. **Saul was not only willing to slaughter the priests of Nob, but he would have destroyed his own people in the city of Keilah just to lay hands on David.** People who are controlled by malice and hatred quickly lose their perspective and begin to abuse their authority.

2. David delivers himself and his men from Saul. (1 Sam. 23:7–29)

While serving on Saul’s staff, David had dodged the king’s spears, thwarted an attempted kidnapping, and escaped the intended violence of three companies of soldiers and of Saul himself. Now that he

was a fugitive with a price on his head and had over six hundred people to care for, David had to be very careful what he did and where he went. There might be another Doeg hiding in the shadows.

From Keilah to the wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam. 23:7–18). David's spies quickly let him know that Saul was planning to come to Keilah, so with Abiathar's help, David sought the Lord's guidance. His great concern was whether the people of Keilah would turn him and his men over to Saul. Since David had rescued the city from the Philistines, you would have expected the citizens to be grateful and to protect David, but such was not the case. The Lord warned David to get out of the city because the people were prepared to turn him over to the king. No doubt the people of Keilah were afraid that if they didn't cooperate with Saul, he would massacre them as he did the people in Nob. David recalled how pained he was because of the tragedy at Nob, and he didn't want another city wiped out because of him. He led his men out and they "kept moving from place to place" (v. 13, NIV) until they settled in the wilderness of Ziph (v. 14).

When Saul got the word that David had left Keilah, he called off the attack, but he still sought him day after day and neglected the important affairs of the kingdom. However, the Lord was on David's side and made sure that Saul was never successful in his quest. Ziph was a town fifteen miles southeast of Keilah in "the wilderness of Ziph" which was part of "the wilderness of Judah." This is a destitute area adjacent to the Dead Sea where David's faith and courage were greatly tested. When visitors to the Holy Land see this wilderness area, they often express amazement that David could ever survive living there.

David's beloved friend Jonathan risked his life to visit David in the wilderness and "helped him find strength in God" (v. 16, NIV). This was their last recorded meeting. Jonathan isn't mentioned again in 1 Samuel until 31:2 where we're told he died on the battlefield. Jonathan had no idea that he would be slain before David became king, because he talked with David about their future coregency and renewed with him the covenant they had made (18:8; 20:31). He assured David that God would surely make him king in His good time, and that David would always be delivered from Saul's schemes to capture him. Jonathan admitted that his father knew all these plans.

From Ziph to the wilderness of Maon (1 Sam. 23:19–28). The Ziphites weren't interested in following God's plan; their great concern was to protect themselves from the rage of King Saul. They knew where David was hiding so they conveyed this important information to Saul, carefully addressing him as "king." This was their way of assuring him that they were loyal to him and not to David. Saul was still manipulating people by making them feel sorry for him (v. 21; 22:8), and this combination of building personal pity and wielding ruthless power seemed to be working. But Saul's character was deteriorating very quickly, while the Lord was molding David into a courageous man of God.

Saul was a good enough warrior to know that he couldn't find David in the wilderness of Judah without some specific directions, so he asked the Ziphites to send him exact details. He wanted to know the hiding places in the rocks and caves that David frequented and the hidden paths that he took. Once he had the map, Saul could search out the area and quickly find his enemy. But David also had his spies working and knew what Saul was doing, and the Lord was watching over the future king. David moved out of the area of Ziph and three miles south into the wilderness of Maon.

But Saul wasn't about to give up, so he followed David into the wilderness of Maon, and the two armies met at "the rock," a well-known mountain in the area. Saul divided his army and sent half around one side of the mountain and half around the other side, a pincers movement that would have meant total defeat for David and his 600 soldiers. But the Lord was in control and brought the Philistines to attack somewhere in Judah, and Saul and his men had to abandon the attack. It was a close call for David, but God kept His promises. To commemorate this great escape, the Jews called the place "Sela Hammahlekoth," which means "the rock of parting." The Hebrew carries the idea of "a

smooth rock” and therefore “a slippery rock,” in other words, “the rock of slipping away.” David quickly moved from Maon to Engedi, next to the Dead Sea, a place of safety with an ample water supply.

David wrote Psalm 54 on this occasion and in it prayed for salvation and vindication from the Lord. David knew that the flatterers in Saul’s official circle, people like Doeg, were telling lies about him and making it look as though David wanted to kill the king. These fawning toadies were hoping to be rewarded by Saul, but they only went down in defeat because they gave allegiance to the wrong king. Leaders who enjoy flattery and praise, and who encourage and reward associates who seek only to gratify their leader’s ego, can never build other leaders or accomplish the will of God to the glory of God. David developed officers who were “*mighty men*” (1 Chron. 21; 2 Sam. 24), but Saul attracted officers who were moral weaklings. “Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:20).

3. David delivers Saul from death. (1 Sam. 24:1–22)

David had prayed in Psalm 54 that the Lord would vindicate him and give him opportunity to prove to Saul that he wasn’t an outlaw who was trying to kill him and seize the throne. After all, Saul was not only David’s king, but he was also his commander and his father-in-law, and regardless of Saul’s evil attitude, David never considered Saul to be his enemy. God answered David’s prayer when Saul and his troops came to find him at Engedi.

David’s temptation (1 Sam. 24:1–4). David and his men were hiding in a large cave, of which there were many in that area, and Saul chose to use that very cave as a place where he could relieve himself. The Law of Moses was very strict when it came to matters of sanitation, especially in the army camp (Deut. 23:12–14). Each soldier was required to leave the camp to relieve himself, and he had to carry a small shovel or trowel among his weapons so he could dig a hole and cover his excrement. This meant that Saul was away from the camp and therefore quite vulnerable. He naturally wanted privacy and he felt that he was not in danger. The fact that he walked right into David’s hiding place not only proved that his spies were incompetent but also that the Lord was still in control.

As David and his men pressed to the walls in the back of the cave, they quietly discussed the meaning of this remarkable occurrence. The men assured David that Saul’s presence in the cave was the fulfillment of a promise God gave him that He would deliver Saul into David’s hands. But when did God say this? Were they referring to Samuel’s words to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:26–29, or to God’s message to Samuel in 16:1? Perhaps the idea came from Jonathan’s words in 20:15, which some of the men might have heard personally. It’s likely that the leaders of the 600 men discussed these matters among themselves, for their future was wrapped up in David’s future, and obviously they came to some false conclusions. **David never planned to kill Saul, for he was sure that the Lord would remove him from the scene in His own way and His own time (26:9–11).**

To David’s men, it seemed providential that Saul was at their mercy (24:4; Ex. 21:13), and both David and Saul agreed with them (1 Sam. 24:10, 18). But that wasn’t the issue. The major question was, “How does the Lord want us to use this occasion?” David’s men saw it as an opportunity for revenge, while David saw it as an opportunity to show mercy and prove that his heart was right. God was giving him an opportunity to answer his own prayer for vindication (Ps. 54:1). David stealthily crept up to the garment that Saul had laid aside, cut off a corner of the robe, and went back into the cave. Saul left the cave not realizing what had happened.

David’s conviction (1 Sam. 24:5–7) *David was too wise in the truth of God’s word to interpret this event as a signal for him to kill Saul, for the law says, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13, NIV). Slaying an enemy on the battlefield or an attacker in self-defense was one thing, but to assassinate an unsuspecting king was quite something else. David reminded his men that Saul was the anointed of the Lord, and that no Jew had the right to attack him. The Jews*

were not even to curse their rulers, let alone kill them, for cursing a ruler was in the same category as blaspheming the name of the Lord (22:28).

However, David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the corner of Saul's robe. His action sent out three messages. First, it was an insolent act of disrespect that humiliated Saul, but it was also a symbolic gesture not unlike what Saul did to Samuel's robe after the Amalekite fiasco (1 Sam. 15:27–28). By cutting off a part of the royal robe, David was declaring that the kingdom had been transferred to him. Finally, the piece of cloth was proof that David did not intend to kill the king and that the flatterers in the court were all liars. David's men would have killed Saul in a moment, but their wise captain restrained them. Leaders must know how to interpret events and respond in the right way.

David's vindication (1 Sam. 24:8–15). When Saul was far enough away from the cave that it was safe, David left the cave and called to him. By using the title "my lord the king" and bowing to the earth, David emphasized what he had said to his men and let Saul know that he was not a rebel. **Even if you can't respect the man or woman in office, you must show respect to the office** (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). David showed his respect by calling Saul "my master" (1 Sam. 24:6), "the Lord's anointed" (vv. 6, 10), "my lord" (vv. 8, 10), "the king" (vv. 8, 14) and "my father" (v. 14). David's bold public appearance also let Saul and his army know that their official spy system was most ineffective.

Using the piece of Saul's robe as evidence, David opened his defense by exposing the deception of the courtiers who slandered David to Saul. The logic was irrefutable: David had an opportunity to kill Saul and refused to do so. David even admitted that some of his men urged him to slay the king, but he rebuked them. David was not guilty of any evil against Saul or any transgression against the Lord, but Saul was guilty of trying to kill David. "The Lord will judge between us," said David, "and prove that your officers are liars, but I will not lift my hand against you." Saul had hoped that the hand of the Philistines (18:17) or the hands of David's soldiers (19:20–21) would kill David, but they failed. Ultimately, Saul died by his own hand on the battlefield (31:1–6).

David quoted a familiar proverb to prove his point: "**Wickedness proceeds from the wicked**" (24:13, NKJV), **which simply means that character is revealed by conduct**. The fact that David did not slay the king indicated that David did not have the character of a rebel or a murderer. But at the same time, David was strongly suggesting that Saul's character was questionable because he wanted to kill his son-in-law! But what was the king really doing as he pursued David? Only chasing a dead dog and a flea that was jumping from one place to another! (Fleas and dogs go together.) The phrase "dead dog" was a humiliating term of reproach in those days (17:43; 2 Sam. 3:8; 9:8; 16:9), so David was humbling himself before the Lord and the king. David closed his defense by asserting a second time (1 Sam. 24:12, 15) that the Lord was the righteous judge and would plead the cause of His faithful servant (Pss. 35:1; 43:1; see 1 Peter 2:23).

David's affirmation (1 Sam. 24:16–22). King Saul once again revealed his confused mental state by lifting up his voice and calling to David, who had certainly spoken long enough for Saul to discern that it was indeed his son-in-law. **As for Saul's weeping, he had manifested temporary emotional reactions like that before, but they never brought about repentance or a change of heart.**

Saul described three possible levels of life: the divine level, where we return good for evil; the human level, where we return good for good and evil for evil; and the demonic level, where we return evil for good. Saul admitted that David was a godly man who, by not slaying him, returned good for evil. But Saul was possessed by demonic forces and did evil to the one man who could have destroyed him. Now Saul openly confessed that he knew David would be the next king (23:17) and would consolidate the nation of Israel that Saul had torn apart. Even then, Saul's major concern was his own name and descendants, not the spiritual welfare of the people; he made David swear that he

wouldn't wipe out his family when he became king. David had made a similar covenant with Jonathan (20:14–17, 42) and he was willing to make the same promise to Saul. **How tragic that Saul's own sins destroyed his family, all but Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth, whom David adopted** (2 Sam. 9).

Because David knew God's calling and believed God's promise, he was able to be so bold before Saul and his army. It was indeed a holy boldness that came from a heart that was right with God. The day would come when David and his cause would be vindicated and the Lord would judge those who had opposed him. Saul went back home to Gibeah, but in spite of his tears and emotional speech, he took up his pursuit of David again (1 Sam. 26:2, 21).

David had won many battles, but one of his greatest victories occurred in that cave when he restrained himself and his men from killing Saul. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32, NKJV). This is a good example for all of us to follow, but especially those to whom the Lord has entrusted leadership.