

Part 18

1 Samuel 27:1–28:2; 29–30

Living with the Enemy

In his more mature years, David heard God say to him, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule” (Ps. 32:8–9, NKJV). The horse is impulsive and rushes heedlessly into the battle, while the mule is stubborn and holds back; and all of us have had both experiences. God doesn’t want to deal with us as men deal with animals; He wants to be close to us and guide us with His eye, the way a parent guides a child. When we behold the face of the Lord, we can see His smile or frown and we can discern from His eyes which way He wants us to go. These chapters record the experiences of David when he was living without that kind of intimate, loving guidance.

1. Departing from the land (1 Sam. 27:1–2)

David had been a fugitive for about seven years when he decided to flee to Gath, but the idea of leaving Israel had probably already been in his mind (26:19). David had every reason to stay in the land and continue to trust God for protection and provision. After all, he was the anointed king of Israel and knew that eventually God would give him the throne. Abigail assured him of this (25:27–31), and even Saul admitted that David would ultimately triumph (26:25). Saul didn’t keep one of his promises to leave David alone, and the constant flattery of the liars in his inner circle encouraged the king to keep on pursuing David. Living the life of a wilderness exile with his life daily in the balance was starting to depress David, and now he had two wives and 600 men to care for.

Ps. 13:1–2, NKJV

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?”

In about three years, David’s exile would end and he would be ruling the people of Judah in Hebron, but he had no way of knowing this. It takes both faith and patience to receive what God has promised (Heb. 6:12), and David seemed to be wavering in both of these essentials. He needed the faith and courage expressed in Psalm 27:1–3, but before we criticize him too severely, let’s recall the time when we’ve done the same thing.

This scene reminds us of a similar situation in the life of our Lord as He faced the cross (John 12:20–33). “Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (12:27–28, NKJV). Jesus had the Father’s glory uppermost in His heart, while David was concerned primarily for his own safety and comfort. Yet God was using the difficulties in David’s life to make him a man of God and to prepare him for the throne, but now he decided to go his own way and solve his own problems.

God’s children must be careful not to yield to despondency. Moses was discouraged over his heavy workload and wanted to die (Num. 11:15), and Elijah ran from the place of duty because of fear and discouragement (1 Kings 19). When we start to look at God through our circumstances instead of looking at our circumstances through God’s eyes, we will lose faith, patience, and courage, and the enemy will triumph. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5, NKJV).

“My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me” (Ps. 31:15).

2. Deceiving the enemy (1 Sam. 27:3–29:11)

At the beginning of his exile, David had fled to Gath for safety, only to discover that his life was still in danger, and then he had to act like a madman in order to escape (21:10–15). But at that time, David was alone, while now he had two wives and was the commander of 600 valiant soldiers. David was still a deceiver, and “faith is living without scheming.” He deceived Achish concerning three matters: the request for a city, the raids his men conducted, and the desire to fight the king’s battles.

His request for a city (1 Sam. 27:3–7). Undoubtedly the news had reached the Philistines that Saul was trying to kill David, and so any enemy of Saul would be warmly welcomed in Gath. Achish could make use of David’s tactical skill and the battle-honed skills of his courageous men. But the total number of people David brought with him could well have been between 2,000–3,000 (30:1–3), and that was quite a crowd to drop into the city of Gath.

Actually, David didn’t want to stay in Gath because there the king and his officers could investigate what he was doing, so he requested that the king give him and his people a city of their own. He was very diplomatic in the way he phrased his request, humbling himself before the king (“I am not worthy to live in the royal city.”) and assuring Achish that his services were always available. Happy to get the extra people out of Gath, where they were probably straining the food and water supply, and ready to strengthen his own army, Achish quickly accepted the idea. He gave David Ziklag, a town about twenty-five miles southwest of Gath, on the border of Simeon but under Philistine control. The tribe of Simeon had its inheritance within the tribe of Judah, which explains why Ziklag was associated with both tribes (Josh. 15:31; 19:5). However, since Achish gave the town to David, it belonged to the kings of Judah ever after. There could not have been a better base of operations for David and his men, and they made good use of it.

His reports of the raids (1 Sam. 27:8–12). Achish thought that David and his band were attacking cities and towns in Judah, when in reality they were raiding the towns and camps of the allies of Achish! David was wiping out the people that Joshua and his successors failed to exterminate when they entered the land, following the orders given by Moses in Deuteronomy 20:16–18. At the same time, he was eliminating the danger of any survivors taking the word to Gath that David was a liar. David took Achish gifts from the spoils of battle and gave him false reports of their activities, and Achish believed him. When word got back to the people of Judah that David was attacking their enemies, this made him even more popular with the leaders.

His responsibility in the battle (1 Sam. 28:1–2; 29:1–11). This is the battle in which Saul and his sons were killed (31:1–6), and it was the providential hand of the Lord that kept David and his men from having to participate. Achish assured David that he and his men were expected to fight alongside the Philistine troops, but David’s reply was evasive: “Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do” (28:2, NIV). The king interpreted this to mean, “Until now, you have received only verbal reports of the prowess of me and my men, but this battle will give us opportunity to display our skills before your very eyes.” But is that what David meant? Certainly he wouldn’t fight against his own people, and he probably had an alternate plan in mind. But the king was so impressed that he commissioned David to be his bodyguard for life!

The troops assembled and paraded, the five lords of the Philistines (6:16–17) leading their companies and David and his men bringing up the rear and guarding the king. When the princes (military commanders) of the Philistines saw their king with David and his 600, they protested, “What are these Hebrews doing here?” This question must have shocked Achish because he had the utmost confidence in David. He hastened to assure his commanders that he had watched David for over a year, in fact, from the first day David left Saul (21:10–15), and he trusted him.

The leaders couldn’t argue with their king, but they could suggest a safety measure. They remembered that in a previous battle, some Hebrew soldiers in the Philistine army had deserted their

posts and fought for Israel (14:21), and David and his men might do the same thing. True, Saul was David's enemy, but they might be reconciled and fight together. After all, the people used to sing, "Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (28:5; 18:7; 21:11), which suggests that they were once fighting together. The safest thing to do was to send David back to Ziklag, far from the battle, and let him carry on his own military attacks elsewhere.

The king gave the message to David, who continued his deception by appearing to be deeply hurt by the order. Had he not proved himself to his king? He wanted to go out and "fight against the enemies of [his] lord, the king," another ambiguous statement that the king would interpret in his favor. **But who was David's "lord and king"—King Saul (24:8; 26:17), Achish, or Jehovah? And who were David's enemies—the Jews or the Philistines?** But Achish assumed that he was David's king, so he ordered him to quietly leave Gath and go back to Ziklag and not to upset the commanders in any way. They had a demanding battle ahead of them and Achish wanted them to be at their best. David obeyed and returned to Ziklag.

Though the Lord was gracious to deliver David and his men from participating in this battle, He isn't obligated to step in and extricate His people from situations caused by their own sinful decisions. We reap what we sow, and in later years, David suffered from being deceived by members of his staff and even of his own family.

3. Delivering the captives (1 Sam. 30:1–20)

David and his band were kept from fighting with the Philistines, but they still had a battle to fight, this time with the Amalekites, the sworn enemies of the Lord and of the Jews (Ex. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17). Because Saul had won an incomplete victory over the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–11), they were still free to attack God's people.

Distress (1 Sam. 30:1–6a). Perhaps the Lord permitted this raid on Ziklag to encourage David to get out of enemy territory and go back to Judah where he belonged. The Amalekite leaders knew that David was at Gath and that all attention was focused on the confrontation between Israel and the Philistines. This was a perfect time to retaliate against David for his raids and to pick up some booty as well. Since most of the men were with David, the residents of Ziklag could put up no resistance and the invaders simply kidnapped the people and took whatever wealth they could find. They burned the city, an act of vengeance on their part but perhaps a message from the Lord that it was time for David to think about returning to Judah.

We can but imagine the horror and grief of David and his 600 men who had never lost a battle. Their city was burned, their wealth had been confiscated, and their wives and children had been kidnapped. It was the mercy of the Lord that the Amalekites spared the lives of the women and children, for in their raids David and his men had certainly killed their share of enemy women and children (27:11). The verb "carried them away" (30:2) is literally "drove them off" and paints the picture of animals being driven off by the herdsman. The men wore themselves out in weeping and David was "greatly distressed," a verb that means he was pressed into a tight corner, the way a potter would press clay into a mold.

Encouragement (1 Sam. 30:6b–15). Different people react in different ways to the same circumstances, because what life does to us depends on what life finds in us. Some of the people wanted to stone David, which was certainly a foolish response. They needed their leader now more than ever, and how would his death solve their problem? We don't blame the men for being grieved, but we question their allowing their hearts to run ahead of their heads. David knew that the encouragement he needed could only come from the Lord. He ordered Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod and together they sought the will of the Lord. Saul had consulted the Lord but had received no answer (28:3–6), but the Lord graciously replied to David's request. David was hardly in a place of complete obedience, but God answered him just the same (Ps. 103:3–10).

Assured by the Lord that his pursuit of the enemy would meet with success, David and his men took off on their beasts and traveled sixteen miles to the brook Besor where 200 men had to stop because they were exhausted. (The Hebrew word translated “faint” means “dead tired.”) That might have discouraged David, but he and his 400 men continued to travel. But where should they go? The Lord hadn’t told them where the Amalekites were camped, but David trusted the Lord to guide him. It was then that they found an Egyptian slave whom his Amalekite master had abandoned because he was ill. The man could have perished in the wilderness, but the Lord had kept him alive for the sake of His servant David. The slave’s master must have been an important man because his servant knew the plans of the Amalekite raiding party and could lead David to their camp. The master hoped that the man would die, but the Lord kept him alive so David could rescue the families that had been kidnapped.

Victory (1 Sam. 30:16–20). In their exuberant false confidence, the Amalekites were celebrating their great victory when David and his men attacked and caught the camp by surprise. They killed all the Amalekites, except 400 young men who escaped, rescued all the people who had been kidnapped, and recovered all the belongings that had been taken from Ziklag. It was a total victory for David, but it was also a profitable victory, because David took the wealth and booty of the Amalekites and claimed it for himself.

As you review what the Lord did for David in that dark hour in his life, you can better understand how He helps His people when problems and crises come into their lives. First, the Lord encouraged David so that he didn’t despair but trusted the Lord to help him. Whenever a crisis comes, we need the courage to face it, and we must not try to blame others or pretend that nothing is wrong. The Lord also gave David wisdom to know what to do and the strength to do it. He and his men were weary, but the Lord enabled David and 400 of his men to persevere in their quest for the Amalekite invaders. The Lord also provided David with the facts he needed so he could find where the enemy was camping in that vast wilderness. When we step out by faith and trust the Lord, He will guide us when we need it. Finally, God gave David and his men the strength they needed to defeat the enemy and recover the prisoners and their wealth.

“Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass” (Ps. 37:5).

4. Dividing the spoils (1 Sam. 30:21–31)

When David said to his troops, “This is David’s spoil” (v. 20), he wasn’t claiming the wealth of the Amalekites for himself in a selfish way but only stating that he would see to its distribution. Each of his fighting men received their part and so did the 200 soldiers who were too weary to continue the pursuit. This generosity of David bothered some of the “evil men and troublemakers” in David’s band (v. 21), but David paid them no heed. He politely laid it down as a rule in his army that all the spoils would be divided among all the men, including those who didn’t actually fight the enemy. After all, it was the Lord who gave them the victory, so nobody had the right to claim the spoils for himself as if the Lord owed it to him. God was gracious and generous to deliver the enemy into their hands, and they should be gracious and generous to share the wealth with others.

David also sent presents from the spoils to the elders of the towns in southern Judah, the places where he and his men had hidden during his wanderings (23:23). The people of these towns had helped David escape Saul, and David felt they deserved some kind of payment for their kindness. After all, if Saul had heard what they did, their very lives might have been in jeopardy. But David was doing more than thank these leaders. He was also paving the way for the time when he would return to their land as Israel’s king

Even though the town had been burned by the enemy, David returned to Ziklag to await news of the battle between Israel and the Philistines. He was sure he wouldn’t have to wait there very long, and he was right, for the news came on the third day (2 Sam. 1:1–2). After he heard the report of the

death of Saul and his sons, he sought the Lord's guidance and the Lord sent him to Hebron (2:1–4). David reigned over Judah for seven and a half years, and Hebron was his capital city (v. 11).

The Lord had kept His promises, and David's wilderness wanderings were now ended.