



# WHOSE HAND WILL PREVAIL?

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 23:1-13  
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One of the grave concerns of Christians in this country is the gradual erosion of a Christian consensus, and with it a mounting hostility against Christianity. In the past decade more and more institutions seem to be aligning themselves against Christianity. The courts, politicians, educators and the mass media are growing increasingly hostile to things Christian. Hardly a day goes by without a letter arriving in my mailbox from a Christian leader rallying believers to take back lost ground.

Whose hand will prevail in America? What do we do when we have lost consensus? Such crises ought to make us rethink the basis of our spirituality. We should ask ourselves how did our spiritual forbears operate when they were in the minority and opposition was mounting on every front.

In our study today in the life of David, from 1 Samuel 23, the conflict between Saul and David intensifies as different groups proclaim loyalty to one side or the other. The key word is the Hebrew word "yad" ("hand"), which occurs seven times in the text. As competing loyalties surface, the narrator wants us to feel the tension of whose "hand" will prevail in this struggle for the kingdom.

Humanly speaking, the battle seems unevenly matched. Saul has the upper hand. He has a sophisticated network of spies, the national army of Israel, and the loyalty of entire cities who are willing to wage war against David. But in the face of these overwhelming odds, David finds the *secret* that will give him the upper hand. I am sure that Jesus meditated and reflected on this text as he began his ministry. Perhaps this was the very text that shaped his thinking as to how he would gain the upper hand.

Our text, 1 Samuel 23:1-13, has two parts. First, David delivers the inhabitants of Keilah from the hand of the Philistines; and second, David flees Keilah as a fugitive to escape the hand of Saul. Between these scenes appears a lone priest, Abiathar the son of Ahimelech, who escaped the blood bath initiated by Saul against the priesthood in Nob. The priest arrives in David's camp, carrying the ephod in his hand.

So let us look at the first scene in the narrative.

## I. David Enters Keilah as a Deliverer<sup>1</sup> (23:1-5)

**Then they told David, saying, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and are plundering the threshing floors." So David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines, and deliver Keilah." But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the ranks of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the LORD once more. And the LORD answered him and said, "Arise,**

**go down to Keilah, for I am giving the Philistines into your hand." So David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines; and he led away their livestock and struck them with a great slaughter. Thus David delivered the inhabitants of Keilah. (NASB)**

### (a) Seeking Divine Direction (23:1-2)

Here we come to David's first pro-active encounter in exile. The text opens with a report that the Philistines are plundering the threshing floors of Keilah. Robbed of their grain supply, the inhabitants of the city were faced with famine conditions. In David's response we see his unique spirit of faith. Just as in chapter 17 with his battle against Goliath, David's faith sets him apart from the rest of Israel. This time his faith is seen as an attribute of one who cooperates with God. David will do nothing without first seeking the divine initiative, so he inquires of God. This word "inquire" (*sha'al*) is the key term in the book of Samuel. Actually it is a word play on the name Saul, who, ironically, never inquired of God.

David's prayer is direct and concise. He asks God, "Shall I go up and attack these Philistines?" The Lord's response is equally direct and brief: "Go and attack the Philistines, and you will deliver Keilah." The Lord adds the promise that if David obeys, he will be a deliverer. The word "deliver" comes from the Hebrew root "*yasha*," from which the word "salvation" is derived. While David is in the wilderness, the Lord wants to establish him as a deliverer of Israel.

So David receives his answer from God. But in the center-line of the scene, David has to deal with the fear of his men.

### (b) Overcoming the Fear of Men (23:3-4)

**But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the ranks of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the LORD once more. And the LORD answered him and said, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I am giving the Philistines into your hand."**

This center-line expresses the fear of David's men. These men were outlaws who were living under tremendous pressure. Common sense would dictate that they would be reluctant to put their lives in double danger by attacking a international power like the Philistines while they themselves were being pursued by the crown.

Here once again David shines as the individual, the man of faith, in contrast to all around him. David prays, probably not merely to confirm the word of the Lord for himself, but as an example to his men of the role of divine guidance. We can visualize a future scene when another King prayed before his men in a garden, but alas they were asleep, and they missed the benefits of his prayer.

This text gives us three insights into the nature of praying for what we would call “guidance.” God is deeply concerned with how we function. He is intimately interested in the person we choose to marry, the career we decide to pursue, etc. Here we learn that the purpose of David’s prayer is direction. The messianic king is seeking direction as the Lord’s servant in the holy war against the Philistines who were attacking an Israelite city. All of the circumstances of this event notwithstanding, David does not assume that he is the one to go. This should encourage us. Although we may come face to face with holy wars in our daily routines, this does not necessarily mean that we are called to fight them. If we do not inquire of the Lord before we enter the fray, we may well go down to defeat.

Second, notice the method of David’s prayer. It is singular and simple. And notice how brief is the Lord’s response. His answer is but one word in Hebrew (verse 11). Interestingly, the Massorettes (the scribes who added the vowel pointing in the Massoretic text) added dramatic breaks in the Hebrew text after every request of David’s (using the Hebrew letter samek “s” vv 2, 4, 11, 12), perhaps to suggest the necessity of “waiting” for the answer to one’s prayers. At least when the text was read, they felt it necessary to pause in the reading after each request. Prayer is a two-way conversation. When we pray, we should be simple and direct, and God’s answer will be equally simple and direct.

Third, the result of prayer should be to lead us into what God is doing. The Lord again answers directly and concisely: “Arise and go.” But then he adds the promise, “for I am giving the Philistines into your hand.” These are the very words God used when he gave Joshua the promised land (Josh 1:2). God made Joshua to be the deliverer of all Israel, as his name, “Yahweh saves,” testifies. God was at work. This was a divine moment of opportunity to be seized immediately. The purpose of prayer is to open up our eyes to what God is already doing. When Yahweh directs, we must act decisively.

That is what David does.

### **(c) Seizing the Moment of Divine Opportunity (23:5)**

**So David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines; and he led away their livestock and struck them with a great slaughter. Thus David delivered the inhabitants of Keilah.**

The report of the battle is quite brief. There is no talk of resistance. “The carrying off of the cattle is put before the report of the defeat. That may be a sign of the ease with which David wins the battle” (Fokkelman). This is very surprising, given the international power of the Philistines. The reason is that once the key issues of trust and dependence have been established, the outcome of the battle is settled. Usually this requires more work and laborious prayer than the battle itself.

Now David is seen as a deliverer whose victory brings a restoration that is greater than the original plunder. The Philistines plundered grain, but David restores not only the grain, he takes the Philistine cattle as well, adding meat and dairy supplies to the lost grain. Here is a hint of what salvation entails. Salvation ensures not just freedom from oppression, but lavish spoils that make our latter state better than our first.

This brings us to the center-piece of the text.

## **II. The Center-piece: The Arrival of a Lone Priest (23:6)**

**Now it came about, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, that he came down with an ephod in his hand.**

Following his delivery of Keilah, there is only a short pause before David faces a new threat from Saul. But in that quiet moment, the narrator inserts the arrival of Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech. We have already covered the conversation that took place between David and Abiathar, recorded at the end of chapter 22. But with its insertion here we learn that that was a flashback; here the conversation is placed in the chronological sequence of events.

What we learn to our surprise is that the massacre at Nob and the deliverance of Keilah took place simultaneously. So we have a scene of terror, bloodshed and cruel annihilation juxtaposed with a scene of liberation, life and salvation. “One is Saul’s doing, the other is David’s. One sends a town to its death, the other restores a town to life” (Fokkelman). If the television cameras were there, which event do you think they would report? We need to learn to read our newspapers with this in mind. When we read of evil, bloodshed and famine, we should ask, where is God working to provide salvation and deliverance? How despicable that Saul, the commander-in-chief, perverts the office for his own personal revenge. He initiates a blood bath on one of his own towns, while at the same time he leaves another town unprotected and vulnerable to the Philistine threat. Such dictatorial behavior is sowing the seeds for future revolutions.

But God always has the last word, even in life’s worst tragedies. David now receives the spoil from Saul’s campaign, the ephod. God’s counter-move against Saul is to place the ephod in David’s hand. Saul has bloodied 85 linen garments, but one man escapes to flee to David. In fact, “Abiathar” means “Father of the remnant.” With this one David can count on God’s full support. Interestingly, the ephod comes after David had already spoken directly to God. This demonstrates that God’s elect, David, is not dependent on having the priestly device; he can go to God directly. But when he has the means, he will use it.

Here is the lesson for us: Reality always precedes ritual in the kingdom of God. Once a distraught young mother asked me to come to the hospital to baptize her newborn baby who was dying of meningitis. She was terrified that her baby would not go to heaven if he was not baptized. I did as she asked, but first I assured her that the omnipotent, compassionate, loving God was not limited to saving her child merely because I had arrived in time to perform the ritual of baptism. How many dying infants does he save around the world every day? He saves countless thousands with no human intervention. As we learn here, reality always precedes ritual.

So David is victorious in holy war. He has the priest and the ephod. But the next scene brings a surprising reversal in David’s fate. Betrayal, not appreciation, is the response of the citizens of Keilah.

## **III. David Flees Keilah as a Fugitive (23:7-13)**

**When it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah,**

Saul said, "God has delivered him into my hand, for he shut himself in by entering a city with double gates and bars." So Saul summoned all the people for war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men. Now David knew that Saul was plotting evil against him; so he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." Then David said, "O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has heard for certain that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down."

Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will surrender you." Then David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit.

Informed of David's whereabouts, Saul immediately thinks he knows the meaning of what has transpired. He arrogantly presumes that God has delivered David into his hand. Fokkelman comments: "The reader, who is not taken in by so much display of self-assurance, realizes that Saul's speech has another side: the king is engaged in convincing himself that there has been a reversal in his barren fate. Saul is really trying to stifle his despair with the argument of David's imprisonment, and beneath it the pain of his being forsaken by God is perceptible."

Has that ever happened to you? God was speaking to you in your disobedience when events suddenly turned and seemed to line up perfectly with your vision. You thought God was on your side and you leapt into the fray. But your haste was really a cover for deeper issues you had refused to face. What looked like confidence of faith was really the blind mask of escapism. God's will is not determined by circumstances, but by ethics.

Saul immediately summons all the people to besiege Keilah, and his arrival with his army forces the hand of the inhabitants of the city. Should they align themselves with the man who proved to be their deliverer, risking the wrath of Saul and the possible destruction of their city, or should they surrender David and remain loyal to Saul? Neutrality was not an option. So it is when we come to Christ. He makes us choose new loyalties at the cost of old ones.

In the midst of Saul's plot David receives the information. He responds by saying, "Bring the ephod here!" Instead of presuming on God, he summons God and listens quietly, forcing nothing. This approach respects God's freedom of action. What a difference between Saul and David. One summons the nation, the other summons God.

David prays, "O LORD God of Israel... Thy servant has heard for certain." These matters which David was facing were bigger than himself. They involved all of Israel, and God's rule on a national level. In this scheme David is merely a servant. Knowing this should make it easy for us to pray. We are servants of God. Our reputations are not at stake. We do not control the outcome of events. As a servant David has two pressing questions: "Will they surrender me?" "Surrender" means "to enclose as in a prison."

David has no intention of committing himself to a prison. "And will Saul come down?" he asks.

Notice that God answers one question at a time. And he answers them logically, not emotionally. In his emotion, David's questions were in reverse order. So God starts with the second question, the less important one. To it he replies, "Saul will come down." This allows David the freedom to ask twice: "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" God responds: "The men of Keilah will deliver you over to Saul." Notice that although God foresaw the result, David was still free to act and change the outcome. If David withdrew in time, he could avoid capture. This demonstrates the marvelous balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Prayer gives us insight into the nature of events, leaving us with the responsibility to act.

So David and his men arise and leave Keilah. His "going out" means Saul gives up and stops "going out" in pursuit of David. Had David settled down in an armed city he would have been in prison, in effect. His wandering as a fugitive would ensure his freedom to act for the kingdom of God. Note, however, that the number of David's men increased from 400 to 600. Not all were unappreciative of David's deliverance. Two hundred men, presumably from Keilah, aligned themselves with David and were willing to give up everything, families, businesses and homes, for this new king. They found their destiny with him, wandering wherever they could, living from hand to mouth.

By means of prayer David delivers Keilah from the hand of the Philistines, and through prayer, David is delivered from the hand of Saul. In between came the mechanism of prayer, the ephod.

## **IV. Final Reflections: Whose Hand Prevails?**

### **(a) What Opportunities Are There In the Wilderness?**

Just because we find ourselves in the wilderness does not mean that God has set us aside to do nothing but wallow in self-pity. Whether we are out of work, or our marriage is at a low ebb, or we are feeling rejected, God does not put us on the shelf. The wilderness was a place of opportunity where God used David to bring salvation to an entire city. In our wilderness, opportunities for salvation abound all around us. When we are broken, that is when we are in the best spiritual state to offer spiritual life to others. I have seen this happen at memorial services here in this church. People who have lost loved ones take this stage and tell their stories of how God met them in their grief, in their wilderness, and delivered them. The pastors do not need to speak in such holy moments. The bereaved are the fugitives, and as such they have authority to speak. In your brokenness you will find wonderful opportunities for evangelism and encouraging others.

### **(b) What Are Our Long-term Expectations?**

The second perspective of this text is the long-term expectations we ought to have for the kingdom of God is this life. In the first scene, the kingdom of God is at hand, and God grants victories. His hand prevails, and multitudes are in awe. In the next scene, however, the miracles are forgotten and there is little appreciation for what God has done. When the time comes to commit and consider the cost, the same multitudes who rejoiced earlier turn the de-

liverer over to the enemy. Whose hand prevails then? It is the same hand — the hand of God. Two hundred men were truly committed, and they joined David. His being forced out of the walled cities to become a wanderer placed him in direct contact with the general population, where he would gain more support.

I wondered what were the expectations of Jesus, the Deliverer of all of Israel, as he meditated on this text. He did acts of wonder, healing the sick, casting out demons, making the blind to see, but after the awe of his miracles subsided and it became time to count the cost, there was little lasting appreciation by the multitudes. Whole cities turned on him at times and tried to kill him. But in the process a remnant was birthed, a remnant that became wanderers with him in the wilderness.

In Israel earlier this year I walked along the Wadi Amud, the dry river bed that goes from Galilee north-east to Syro-Phoenicia. Jesus walked down that same river bed once with his disciples. It was too dangerous for him to stay in Galilee and he was forced out to Gentile territory. On the way he healed the Syro-Phoenician girl who was demon-possessed, and this miracle opened up a wonderful ministry to the Gentiles. What looked like failure actually was a great victory. This was the secret to evangelism in the first century. When the church was scattered and on the run, Acts 8:4 tells us, “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.” The hand of God was prevailing amidst the persecution. A few years ago, the

people of the Eastern Bloc countries were rejoicing over their new-found freedom. They called it a miracle from God. But if you visit these countries today, you will find corruption and decay evident on every side. If the communists are not still in power, they are making a comeback. Christians are discouraged, but God’s hand still prevails. It is the deep commitment of the remnant that interests him, not the momentary awe of the multitudes.

### **(c) What is the Secret to God’s Hand Prevailing?**

Our Sovereign God leads us directly into his rule by prayer. How did David prevail over the hand of Philistines and deliver an entire city? It was because God gave him the victory. How did David know that God would give the victory? It was through prayer. How did David escape the hand of Saul and the betrayal of an entire city? By the knowledge he gained through simple, conversational prayer. So speak to God, and wait on God. And when you hear from him, act. No matter whether you deliver a community or end up on the run, do not forget that God’s hand always prevails.

*High King of heaven, my victory won,  
May I reach heaven’s joys, O bright heav’n’s Sun!  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.*

Amen.

1. For my observations I have depended heavily on the excellent insights of J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 2, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986).