



THE SECRET, DECISIVE HAND

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 23:14-24:1
Fifteenth Message
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When we last saw David, he was on the run from king Saul, living hand to mouth. The fugitive, together with his band of outlaws, “*went wherever they could go*” (1 Sam 23:13). The constant pressure resulting from these conditions created in David a desire to settle down and find a permanent solution to his dilemma.

Many Christians would wish the same for themselves. Last week I had a call from a friend in North Carolina whose wife is dying of cancer. They visited our church last year and the elders anointed this woman with oil and prayed for her. Her doctors are amazed that she is still alive. But, my friend told me, it is a day-to-day struggle. I also had a visit from a high school girl who is a friend of my daughter. She told us about a stressful situation she is facing at school because many of her friends are turning to alcohol and drugs. She wants to transfer out of that school, but it appears her request will not be granted. Another friend of mine who is studying for her doctorate has been assigned to a professor who is so abusive and controlling that my friend became physically ill last year. She sees no way out of this problem.

I feel tempted to respond to situations like these by trying to remove whatever is causing the stress. But that is not my role. That is the holy business of God. What can we do to help relieve stresses like the ones I mentioned? Our text from 1 Samuel demonstrates that what we need is the manifestation of that secret, yet decisive hand of God. In David’s case, we will see God’s hand manifested in two ways.

In 23:14, the narrator summarizes David’s wilderness wanderings.

I. Longings To Settle Down (23:14)

And David stayed in the wilderness in the strongholds, and stayed in the hill country in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not deliver him into his hand. (NASB)

David and his band of disciples were given no map or itinerary for their wilderness wanderings; they were forced to flee to wherever they could find safety. This was what brought about their longing for a permanent place so that they could settle down. This is apparent in the word “stayed” (*yashav*), used in verses 14a, 14b, 18, 25 and 24:1. The word means “to settle down, to be at rest, to stay, to remain.” This was what Israel longed for during the time of the Judges. Tired of living by faith, moment by moment, with temporary rulers, they longed for the day when the appointment of a king over them would settle their problem once and for all. It is ironic that the new king, David, is forced to live the same way as his forbears. For him there would be no settling down to create a power base within the region of his own tribe. Saul was seeking him

every day, yet Saul would not prevail. The narrator reveals the outcome of the search in this opening verse: “but God did not deliver (literally: not give) him into his hand.”

How would God manifest his hand to David and enable him to prevail? There is a hint given in verse 14 in the words “not deliver.” The Hebrew writers liked to hide word clues in their texts. In Hebrew, this term, “*lo natan*,” sounds very much like “Jonathan.” In the next scene, it is Jonathan who comes out of the blue to encourage David.

II. Jonathan Strengthens David’s Hand In God¹ (23:15-18)

Now David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul’s son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God. Thus he said to him, “Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be second (in rank) to you; and Saul my father knows that also.” So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; and David stayed at Horesh while Jonathan went to his house.

David fled southwest from Keilah to the wilderness of Ziph. Horesh may be a place name, but its original meaning was “forested height.” David sought security in the highest terrain, places that offered good camouflage. In order to get a feel for this country during our trip to Israel in the summer, we drove south from Adullam and entered this wilderness area. Now part of the West Bank, it is hilly terrain, criss-crossed with windy roads and dotted by small Palestinian villages. Like David and his band, we didn’t feel welcome in these towns. People were observing us and our Israeli license plates. We felt an internal sense that we should leave, and about halfway through our journey we returned to Jerusalem.

In this place God manifested his hand to David by making him aware that his life was in danger. Simultaneously, in Gibeah, God moved Jonathan to go and seek out his friend David. What wonderful internal burdens God gives! “Jonathan and David cannot be driven apart by any power in the world, and certainly not the reigning king” (Fokkelman). Isn’t it interesting that Saul, with his military and his spies, cannot find David, yet Jonathan has no trouble locating him? It was because the Holy Spirit was guiding his steps.

And look at what Jonathan did for his friend: “he strengthened his hand in God.” This is the best thing a friend can do for someone who is in trouble. A friend must not manipulate the circumstances or try to force God’s hand, but rather bring one back in touch with God and his sovereignty over the affairs of men. Jonathan reassures Da-

vid, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be second to you." They would both lead the new administration. Significantly, Jonathan adds, "and my father knows that also."

Here we find three principles that will help one who is in distress. The first is this: Remind them that history is driven not by might but by morality. Jonathan's word, "the hand of my father will not find you," is the exact reversal of what Samuel prophesied of Saul when God's Spirit came upon him: "The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you mightily...do for yourself what your hand finds to do; for God is with you" (1 Sam 10: 7). Now, because of his disobedience, Saul's "hand" is impotent. He is powerless to find David.

Here is the second thing: Remind them that history is driven by the promises of God. Jonathan says to David, "You will reign, and I will be second to you." When it comes to David's future, Jonathan is right on the mark, but when it comes to his own future, his vision is clouded. Our ability to help others spiritually is often better than our perception of our own future. Perhaps due to his consistently positive outlook, and his overhearing the secret confessions of his father, Jonathan thinks that the transfer of the kingdom will be a peaceful one.

The third thing is this: Remind them that faith looks beyond the surface things to the heart. "My father knows this," says Jonathan. He had overheard his father's confessions in the privacy of his court. The enemy had admitted defeat. The way to strengthen someone in God is take them to God's throne. God is faithful, and his promises are true. But there is no timetable. Sadly, this is the last meeting between these two friends.

A meeting like this enlarges our hearts in the love of God like nothing else. This past summer I had some deep struggles that I could not resolve. One Sunday during my sabbatical I went over to PBC/North to attend services, and as I was driving into the church I met Rich Carlson. I was surprised to see him; I did not know he was visiting from Vienna. He told me he was going to the soccer game between Romania and Sweden at Stanford, and he invited me to go along. Instead of going to church, I spent the day with Rich at the game. Afterwards over a cup of coffee, I poured out my soul to him. Because of his love for me and his understanding of what drives me, I went away from our meeting with the sense that he had strengthened my hand on God. I could not help but think that God had sent him all the way from Vienna to encourage me. That is the secret yet decisive hand of God at work.

Next, we find the second manifestation of God's hand to deliver David, when a city pledges to help Saul in his cause.

III. The Philistines Deliver David from the Hand of Saul (23:19-24:1)

(a) New Loyalties for an old King (23:19-23)

Then Ziphites came up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is not David hiding with us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is on the south of Jeshimon? Now then, O king, come down according to all the desire of your soul to do so; and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand." And Saul

said, "May you be blessed of the LORD; for you have had compassion on me. Go now, make more sure, and investigate and see his place where his haunt is, {and} who has seen him there; for I am told that he is very cunning. So look, and learn about all the hiding places where he hides himself, and return to me with certainty, and I will go with you; and it shall come about if he is in the land that I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah."

While God secretly sends his messenger to encourage his servant, at the same time the devil is sending his messengers to the rival king. The Ziphites send a delegation to Saul in Gibeah, pledging their loyalty to him. This is the second community to come to Saul's aid and place their hopes for the future with him rather than with the outlaw king. The situation looks unevenly matched, to say the least: David and one friend against Saul and a whole city.

The Ziphites begin by overwhelming Saul with a wealth of geographical details concerning David's whereabouts. "Is not David hiding with us in the strongholds of Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon?" The expression "Is not David..." is "a rhetorical start in an information-giving situation indicating that there is a difference that must be bridged: 'what we, who are bringing news, find self-evident, is not yet so for you...'" It has the connotation of 'you must know'" (Fokkelman). Children delight in playing this "I know something you don't know" game with their parents. In my house I'm often the last one to find out what's going on.

The Ziphites tell Saul that all he need do is show up and he can have "all the desire of his soul." This is the same expression as the one used in chapter 20:4. There it is an expression of Jonathan's love to David, while here it is the expression death. The Ziphites offer to do all the work, since they know the terrain like the back of their hands. All Saul has to do is show up and get all the credit.

Saul's reply underlines his great relief. Finally he is not alone; someone feels sorry for him. During Saul's pity party in Gibeah (22:7-8), no one but Doeg, a foreigner, would empathize with him. But here he has the sympathy of the Ziphites. These are his own. They think with him. As a matter of fact, they are ahead of him. In his relief, Saul exclaims, "Blessed are you in the LORD!" Foolishly, he uses God's personal name in a matter he knows to be contrary to God's purposes, for God has blessed David. In this he commits the sin of blasphemy.

But Saul is a little less presumptuous this time. He has not forgotten how David escaped from Keilah. "This man is cunning," he tells the Ziphites. "Go back and do more homework. Then, when you pinpoint his exact location, knowing all his hiding places, I will come out with you and 'search him out among all the thousands of Judah.'" This last line reveals just how much pain that song of women of Israel following David's victory over Goliath had caused him. His jealousy over these sentiments now has become the driving force of his life.

But why does Saul hesitate? The Ziphites have already located David. Why wait now?

(b) Discovery, Pursuit, Enclosure...Checkmate! (23:24-26)

Then they arose and went to Ziph before Saul. Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in

the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon. When Saul and his men went to seek him, they told David, and he came down to the rock and stayed in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard it, he pursued David in the wilderness of Maon. And Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain; and David was hurrying to get away from Saul, for Saul and his men were surrounding David and his men to seize them.

In his search for David Saul is now led by the men of Ziph. David changed his location to more difficult terrain, but to no avail. He is spotted with exact precision in the wilderness of Maon. David flees and is again pursued and finally surrounded. The prey is trapped; the Ziphites have done their job. Now it's Saul's turn to act. But...

(c) But...A Messenger (23:27-24:1)

But a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid on the land." So Saul returned from pursuing David, and went to meet the Philistines; therefore they called that place the Rock of Separation. And David went up from there and stayed in the strongholds of Engedi.

Here is the divine moment. Suddenly an entirely new character is thrust into the drama. "A messenger came." This man comes bearing news so compelling that Saul is forced to leave immediately to protect against the Philistine invasion. God can use even our enemies to save us. This is an exact reversal of the David and Goliath story. On that occasion there were two mountains. Standing between them was a man who was ready to meet the Philistines. Now David is on the run, with Saul in the middle, and the Philistine army arrives to deliver David. Later, David would memorialize that great rock that no longer seemed to be able to hide him, naming it "The Rock of Separation" ("Slippery Rock").

The narrator leaves us with two questions hanging in the air: Who is this messenger? Who sent him? I'm sure David thought this man was a messenger sent from heaven. In fact, the word "messenger" is the same word for angel (*malak*). In Psalm 35:6, perhaps reflecting on this moment, David links both of these terms, "slippery" and "messenger or angel":

Let their way be dark and slippery,
With the angel of the LORD pursuing them.
For without cause they hid their net for me;
Without cause they dug a pit for my soul. (Ps 35:6-7)

So as to the identity of the messenger, the narrator leaves the matter ambiguous. But as far as David was concerned there was no ambiguity. Saul may have a city on his side, but David has the angels of God on his side.

The second question the narrator leaves hanging is, Why does Saul hesitate to seize David? The last time the Philistines attacked an Israelite city, Saul continued to pursue David, allowing the city to be destroyed. Why does he hesitate now, especially when he is in reach of his enemy, perhaps merely minutes from the grand moment he has waited so long to taste? It seems like rather inconsistent behavior. The answer is, it is inconsistent! Fokkelman astutely observes that there are two Sauls. Psychologists know that often there is more than one thing that drives people. If we are going to predict how people will behave,

we have to be in touch with their subconscious, often conflicting drives.

On the one hand, we see Saul, the "power-crazed dictator" (an abuser, we would say today). Jealousy has consumed him and makes him want to destroy David. This is the Saul who craves raw power, the man who will do anything to maintain his political base. On the other hand, we see Saul, the "pitiful and powerless" king. This is how he appears when he comes to grips with reality and all his insecurities float to the surface. Saul has heard the prophetic word. Deep in his heart he knows his fate is sealed. At first he couldn't face this. He denied it, and then suppressed it. But as David grew more and more successful, that force drove its way to the surface, proclaiming that Saul must one day face his destiny.

This is what Jonathan overheard in the secrecy of the king's palace. If this occasion in fact is the moment when the two kings, Saul and David, must face off, Saul has grave doubts that he will be victorious. This mysterious messenger allows him to postpone the confrontation, denying the inevitable. The reader is left wondering which force finally will have its way in Saul. This is what I see at times in counseling situations. Which force will have its way, the vulnerable, insecure person who speaks of repentance, or the abusive controller who wants to be in charge.

Psalm 36 gives some of David's deeper reflections which seem to fit well with what he learned by the secret manifestations of God's hand in this text.

IV. David's Reflections (Psalm 36:1-9)

(For the choir director. A Psalm of David the servant of the LORD)

**Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart;
There is no fear of God before his eyes.
For it flatters him in his own eyes,
Concerning the discovery of his iniquity and the hatred of it.
The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit;
He has ceased to be wise and to do good.
He plans wickedness upon his bed;
He sets himself on a path that is not good;
He does not despise evil (Ps 36:1-4).**

I want to leave you with two applications of the wonderful secret manifestation of God's hand in your life.

(a) Evil Is Deep and Powerful

Over the years I have come to understand that part of our wilderness experience is designed to bring us face to face with evil so that we can contemplate its power. Evil lies like a powerful prophetic oracle that is planted deep within the heart of the wicked. It operates under the guise of flattery, keeping it from self-discovery. Saul may have momentary realizations of this, and even make momentary confessions of it that convinced Jonathan. But not David. David knew that because Saul refused to face the primary issues, evil had enveloped him completely. He had turned his back on God and had never faced that issue. Thus it did not matter what the other side of his personality said. David's poetic expressions of the evil in Saul's heart have become classic expressions of evil in the soul. They are quoted by Paul in the New Testament when he speaks of the depravity of the human heart.

So part of our wilderness experience is to give us an understanding of evil and its power. We must fear God lest these forces of evil take root in our hearts.

Yet it was in the context of evil that David experienced the depths of God's love for him.

(b) But God's Love Is Deeper Still (Psalm 36:5-9)

**Your loyal-love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
Your judgments are like a great deep, O LORD,
You preserve man and beast.
How precious is Your loyal-love, O God!
And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of
Your wings.
They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house;
And You give them to drink of the river of Your de-
lights.
For with You is the fountain of life;
In Your light we see light.**

David's external circumstances, as stressful and limiting as they were, were powerless to prevent him from experiencing God's love. In the very context of evil he finds love. While she was languishing in a Nazi dungeon, Corrie Ten Boom said, "No matter how deep is our suffering, God's love is deeper still." While evil leads down a narrow dead-end path, God's love comes from all directions. His love is "unsearchable" (it is like the heavens and the clouds); it is "impregnable" (like the mountains); it is "inexhaustible" (like the great deep); "yet, for all that, welcoming and hospitable (6c-9)."²

Here is the lesson of this text: The omnipotent, incomprehensible, unfathomable God takes a personal interest in us! In our wilderness, he will break through and reveal his love to us.

For those of you who are in the wilderness today, may this love, given by the secret manifestation of God's hand, be yours in fullest measure.

There is a light that cometh and overpowereth a man's soul and assureth him that God is his, and he is God's, and that God loved him from everlasting...It is a light beyond the light of ordinary faith...the next thing to heaven: you have no more, you can have no more until you come hither...It is faith elevated and raised up about its ordinary rate, it is electing love of God brought home to the soul. (Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones).

1. For my observations in the text I have heavily depended on the excellent insights of J.P. Fokklemann, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986) 435-451.

2. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 1973), 147.

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