



EMERGING FROM THE DARKNESS

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 24:1-22
Sixteenth Message
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Our studies in the life of David have taught us that it is in the wilderness that the spiritual reformation of the soul takes place and the secrets to reigning in the kingdom of God are learned. In the wilderness David learned both how to pray and how to fight a holy war. In the wilderness he observed God create through a process of painful rejection, a new family whose bonds were stronger than death.

In our text from 1 Samuel this morning we will see that God now takes David to a new plateau of spirituality. David will have a face to face confrontation with Saul, the very one who caused him to flee to the wilderness in the first place. There is nothing I hate more than confrontation, yet I have learned that we cannot grow up spiritually unless we learn how to confront and how to accept confrontation. But how should we do this is the question. How are we to confront those in authority over us—an employer, a parent, an older sibling—who may have abused his or her power and caused us great pain?

Our text transports us to the popular tourist site of Engedi, in Israel, a lush oasis fed by underground springs that gush forth out of the deep canyon walls. This is where David and his men have found their most recent refuge.

I. David's Men: "This is a DAY for Retribution!" (24:1-8)

(a) Seeking Refuge in a CAVE in Engedi (24:1-3)

Now it came about when Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, saying, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of Engedi." Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel, and went to seek David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. And he came to the sheepfolds on the way, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the inner recesses of the cave. (NASB)

Having escaped Saul's clutches at that eventful "slippery rock," David has headed as far east as he possibly can, to the wilderness of Engedi, by the edge of the Dead Sea. Saul returns with his army from fighting the Philistines and pursues David to a place named "Rocks of the Wild Goats." Here, rocky, precipitous walls make life uninhabitable for anything but wild goats (V. de Velde).

Archaeologists have found this that area is dotted with caves. One commentator wrote:

Near the ruins of the village of Chareitun, hardly five minutes walk to the east, there is a large cave or chamber in the rock, with a very narrow entrance entirely concealed by stones, and with many side vaults in

which the deepest darkness reigns, at least to anyone who has just entered the limestone vaults from the dazzling light of day. This is the largest cave in the district, if not the largest of all, and that according to Pococke the Franks call it a *labyrinth*, the Arabs *Elmaama*, i.e. hiding place, while the latter related how at one time thirty thousand people hid themselves in it "to escape an evil wind."¹

David is resting with his band of men in one of these caves. Out of all the caves in the area, Saul chooses to relieve himself in the very one where David is hiding. Temporarily blinded by the contrast between the brilliant sunlight outside and the darkness of the cave, Saul is alone and extremely vulnerable. The stage is set...

David's men have no qualms in interpreting the circumstances as a divine opportunity handed to them. "Seize the day!" is their catchword.

(b) David's Men: "A Day for Retribution!" (24:4a-b)

And the men of David said to him, "Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold; I am giving your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it good in your eyes.'"

In this unfolding drama three nouns, "day," "hand," and "eye," and one verb, "cut off," are repeated by three different players in each scene. Each time they are uttered, the words are arranged differently, thereby giving three different points of view as to what kind of day the speakers regard it to be.

David's men are quick to interpret the events as a set-up by the LORD himself to David's advantage. "Behold, this is the day!" they cry. They determine God's will by circumstances. And they reinforce their viewpoint with words which they heard previously and which they regard as a legitimate promise of God in holy war: "I am giving your enemy into your hand" (23:4). Finally, they lure David by appealing to his own personal desires. They counsel him, "do what is good in your own eyes." Notice the concluding words of each phrase they use: "to you," "your hand," "your eyes." This note in the equation is to them the key, driving element, to which God's promise and providence are made subordinate. "These men hitch God to their wagon" (Fokkelman).

To the discerning ear, this is the one dissonant note that skews the entire equation. It evokes tragic memories of the days of Judges, when "there was no king in Israel, every man did what was right in his own eyes." Unless we are led by God's Spirit we can combine Scripture with circumstance, apply it with utter freedom, and get it all wrong,

with disastrous consequences. When friends advise you in this way, they are not doing you a favor; they are actually becoming your enemy. Eugene Peterson wrote: "Following Jesus means *not* following your impulses and appetites and whims and dreams, all of which are sufficiently damaged by sin to make them unreliable guides for getting any place worth going."

And this was David's analysis, as we shall see.

(c) David: "This is the LORD's Anointed" (24:4c-7)

Then David arose and cut off the edge of Saul's robe secretly. And it came about afterward that David's heart smote him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe. So he said to his men, "Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD's anointed." And David persuaded his men with these words and did not allow them to rise up against Saul. And Saul arose, left the cave, and went on his way.

Instead of cutting off Saul, all David does is cut off the edge of the king's robe. His men find his actions unbelievable: "the men can't believe their eyes when David returns with only a portion of the robe, and they can't believe their ears when they hear David's speech" (Fokkelman).

Why did David do this? The turning point of the whole scene is found in the words, "David's heart smote him." He had touched what was holy, and the result was that his heart began to palpitate. It was as if he had touched a high-voltage electric socket. If he had gone any further and killed Saul, he sensed that it might have been the death sentence (see 2 Sam 1:15-16). His heart sensitive to God, David overrules his men, forbidding them to rule over him. For David, there was only one issue. Saul was still the LORD's anointed. He was still in Holy Office, representing God, therefore it was God who had to remove him. In determining God's will it is not circumstance, which feeds personal desires, but holy ethics which must be appealed to.

Have you ever had someone in authority over you act towards you in an abusive way? There will come a time perhaps when that person, like Saul was on this occasion, is exposed and vulnerable. What do you do then? You may not have cut them off with a knife, but you have cut them off with your words, dishonoring them in the process. God's will is not determined by circumstances. Circumstances are part of the equation, but they are not all of it. His will is determined by ethics. On occasion people who have been involved in an adulterous affair have told me, incredibly, that it was God who led them into their actions by setting up the circumstance. They avoided the fact that what they were involving themselves in was sinful and wrong, but appealed to what they mistakenly discerned as God's will because of circumstances.

David will not be ruled by his men, but rather he uses ethics to overrule over them.

**II. David: "This is a DAY for REVELATION!"
(24:9-15)**

Now afterward David arose and went out of the cave and called after Saul, saying, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground and prostrated himself. And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men, saying, 'Behold, David seeks to harm you'? Behold, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD had given you today into my hand in the cave, and some said to kill you, but my eye had pity on you; and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' Now, my father, see! Indeed, see the edge of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the edge of your robe and did not kill you, know and perceive that there is no evil or rebellion in my hands, and I have not sinned against you, though you are lying in wait for my life to take it. May the LORD judge between you and me, and may the LORD avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness'; but my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog, a single flea? The LORD therefore be judge and decide between you and me; and may He see and plead my cause, and deliver me from your hand."

(a) Disarming with Vulnerability

The first task in confronting a man who is driven by perverted passions is to disarm his emotions. In Saul's case, David has to disengage Saul's jealousy, at least momentarily, so as to enable him to receive the light of truth and logic. David leaves the cave as Saul entered it, alone and vulnerable.

This is the way to disarm people and get a hearing. Have them drop their guard so that they are disengaged from their emotions. When the opportunity arises we must treat even our worst enemies with dignity and respect. They are made in the image of God, and God at times places such people in authority over us. I think, as a whole, Christians have lost this skill. This is why the world pays scant attention to what we have to say when we gather in righteous indignation and shout at those whom we regard as our enemies. The words we use do not penetrate hearts or emotions. We would do far better if we acted like David acts in this situation with Saul.

Once David has the stage and has got Saul's attention, he pleads his innocence in word and deed.

(b) David Pleads His Innocence by Word and Deed

In his opening words to Saul, David asks, "Why are you ruled by the words of men?" In reality, it is the deep, deviant voices of jealousy within Saul's subconscious that control him. But by giving Saul an out, David continues to disarm him. David says, in effect, "This is a day for your eyes to see. The LORD did deliver you into my hand, but I took pity on you [just like Doeg, and the Ziphites] and I did not kill you, though I was highly exhorted to do so. You are the anointed. Look at your robe, and judge for yourself." David seizes the opportunity to grant Saul one moment in his life when the light of logic overrules the demons of jealousy and forces him to confront the naked truth.

J.P. Fokkelman makes an interesting comparison between the cave and Saul's psyche:

A clean look by Saul at himself—that is what the confrontation is aimed at...We can for a moment read the cave as picture of Saul's skull (or his subconscious): David and his men are hidden in the back of his mind like a tumor; they form a never-ending torment and obsession in the inner recesses of his brain, i.e. in the caverns of jealousy, in the darkness of madness. David has been away from Saul's vicinity for a long time now. During that period, the king, harassed as he is, has been able to build up an evil picture of David, that no one dared contradict (v. 10) and which has never been tested against reality. Now, in chapter 24, David comes forth from the cave and appears to Saul as large as life. Thus the king is given the opportunity of testing the picture of his rival against reality. David himself ensures that Saul cannot shirk such a comparison, by making a long speech as he shows the corner of the king's cloak. Saul is forcefully confronted with the innocence of a loyal, prostrate subject David.²

Having pleaded his innocence, David now indicts Saul.

(c) David Indicts Saul as the Guilty Party

With his words, "You are lying in wait for me," David turns the proverb on Saul: "Out of the wicked comes forth (*yatza*) wickedness, but my hand shall not be against you." He continues, "After whom has the king of Israel come out (*yatza*), a dead dog, a flea on a dead dog?" Has Saul come out against such an utterly insignificant thing? David is pressing Saul to search his heart and thus uncover far deeper issues. Why am I a threat? he asks.

Having indicted Saul, David now invites the Lord to be judge.

(d) David Trusts the Living LORD to Judge

We have the right to confront, indict, and force the logic in a setting of complete vulnerability but, having done that, we must let the Lord be the judge. This is exactly what David does with Saul. God put him in office, and God must remove him. Being vulnerable and respectful does not mean we have to be dishonest. We are even allowed to protest our innocence, and to confront others with an indictment of guilt, but when it is over, we must not manipulate the outcome, but rather trust God.

Now that Saul has been backed into a corner by David's display of humility and respect, and the sheer force of David's logic has dismantled his false view of him, what is the king to do?

III. Saul: This Is a DAY for Reward (24:16-22)

Now it came about when David had finished speaking these words to Saul, that Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" Then Saul lifted up his voice and wept. And he said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you. And you have declared today that you have done good to me, that the LORD deliv-

ered me into your hand and yet you did not kill me. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safely? May the LORD therefore reward you with good in return for what you have done to me this day. And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. So now swear to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name from my father's household." And David swore to Saul. And Saul went to his home, but his men went up to the stronghold.

(a) Saul Weeps

Saul weeps over David. "Beneath both tragedy and failure there is the inconsolable, inarticulate, unmeasured pathos of a life gone empty. Saul must weep. He must weep before God and before David. When he has wept, then he can speak. It is his honest, unrestrained weeping that permits him to yield to the now irresistible and obvious future, which is David."³

(b) Saul Confesses

Then Saul makes a full confession. He admits to his own guilt and affirms David's innocence. He even matches David's proverb with one of his own to show that David's goodness was an extraordinary thing.

(c) Saul Blesses and Prophecies

Then amazingly, Saul imparts his blessing to David for the establishment of his kingdom (much as a father would do for his firstborn son), and prophetically gives full acknowledgment as to the permanence of the blessing. This is reminiscent of what Hannah earlier comprehended by faith (1 Sam 2:10).

(d) Saul Cuts His Losses

Finally, realizing the inevitability of his own doom, Saul pleads with David, on the basis of David's merciful heart and his authority as the new king, to take a vow to protect Saul's descendants after his downfall. He asks David not to cut off his seed, and David pledges to do so by taking an oath. What a moment of triumph for David. What a moment of holy rebuke to his men. They wanted a dead king, but instead, Saul tearfully hands over his crown to David.

IV. Reflections on "Emerging from the Darkness"

(a) The Sovereignty of God Quiets Our Fears

Who is this God who makes even his enemies bow down at the feet of his anointed? God so orchestrated David's story that everyone in this narrative in 1 Samuel—Jonathan, Michal, the women, the people, Saul's servants, the Philistines, the priesthood, and now finally, Saul himself—recognizes and pays tribute to God's newly anointed. God will never coerce his reign on anyone. He gathers the truthful testimony of all who give assent to the king.

The same was true in the story of Jesus. At the time of his birth, people willingly came to pay tribute to the new King. At his death, even his enemy, Pilate, asks him the

question, "What is truth?" Confronted with the truth of Jesus, Pilate himself bore testimony in the sign placed above the cross, written in the three languages of the day, "The King of the Jews." The Jews protested, but Pilate said, "What I have written I have written." This is but a foretaste of what we can ultimately expect when the story is repeated and intensified in Christ, that "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-10).

(b) The Love of God Awakens Our Hearts

God is not only driven by truth, he is driven by love. It is the love of God that pursues Saul and tenaciously quiets his demons long enough for him to see the light. In a moment of divine revelation, God reaches out to Saul to repent. That same love is forever reaching out to the hearts of men and women. A millennium later, the new Davidic King would emerge out of his cave to relentlessly pursue another Saul. Like the jealous and angry Saul of old, this Saul was wreaking havoc on the early church. But, blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, he heard the words of Jesus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" and he repented. Not only was he forgiven, he went on to become the apostle Paul, the greatest spokesman for Christianity.

Perhaps there is a Saul listening to me today. You don't know why you are here, but the love of God has been pursuing you. I want you to know this: No matter what you have done in the past, God loves you. Do not refuse the

light of his love today. Your response may determine whether you become like Saul of Gibeah, and commit suicide, or whether you become like Saul of Tarsus, and become a spokesman for God.

(c) The Story of God Invites Our Participation

As we have already said, Engedi is a lush oasis set in a barren wilderness. There underground springs gush forth, creating an oasis of vineyards and date palms. Christians have the springs of the Holy Spirit flowing deep within them. When God allows us to confront our abusers we should do so by loving them and forgiving them, thus turning barren lives into oasis-like springs of Eden.

The apostle Paul admonished, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:19-21).

This is the highest call of all—turning our enemies into friends.

1. C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:234.

2. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 2 (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum 1990), 460-461.

3. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990).

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