



INTO THE ENEMY CAMP

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 26:1-13
Nineteenth Message
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In your wilderness wanderings, have you ever felt that you were going around in circles? You arrived at a certain place and had a strange sensation that you had been there already. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, you were experiencing “deja vu all over again!” These are times when we say to God, “What are we doing here? I thought I took this test already.”

Eighteen years ago this month, Emily and I found ourselves in just such a place. It was exactly a year after the death of our son, and Emily had just given birth to our daughter, Jessica Lynne. We were in the same hospital, with the same doctor. The same kind of torrential downpour was falling outside. And the story ended with the same outcome—a grave. Never in my wildest dreams did I think this would happen again. Didn’t we respond in faith the first time? I asked myself.

*Could it be to walk this way again
Conception to pain, never to regain
When the first born, has already paid?*

An interesting phenomenon about Biblical narrative is the subtle, yet powerful use of repetition of certain stories. In our text today, at first glance David’s trial appears to be an exact repetition of the situation in chapter 24, when David confronted Saul in the cave of Engedi. The account has the same characters and the same plot. The confrontation is the same, and the outcome is the same.

We Westerners have little appreciation for repetition. It reminds us of television reruns, so we tune out. Liberal scholars since the 1800’s have treated these Hebrew stories that way. They say these texts are merely different accounts of the same story, told by different editors or redactors to promote their own biases.

Yet that approach fails to take into account the Hebrew mindset and the Biblical view of spiritual formation. The Hebrew word “to learn” (*lamad*); from which the word “disciple” comes (Isaiah 50:4; “Talmud” derives from the same word) means, to learn by repetition. Lessons are taught over and over. Like learning scales on a piano, one practices over and over until the keys seem like extensions of the fingers. When the keyboard is mastered, then the student is free to create something new. The Hebrews did not focus on what was the same in these repeated stories, but on what was new. They regarded repetition as God’s vehicle to make all things new. Repeated trials in their lives did not discourage them, but rather gave them a sense that God’s

divine hand was drawing them into the divine drama.

Spiritual formation does not occur without repetition. We ought not to regard a situation that appears to be a rerun as something to be slavishly endured, but as a sovereign twist in the divine drama, designed to make things new. That is why I do not want to rush through these stories. I want to take time to study them carefully. True learning is not just passing along information. We must take time to meditate at every twist and turn in the story and thus comprehend the divine significance of each event.

There are two movements to this story. The first brings David as close to Saul as possible, under the cover of night; in the second movement, David moves as far away as possible from Saul in the light of day. The first scene is governed by closeness of space, shrouded in silence; the second is governed by breadth of space, with speeches echoing back and forth across a valley. We will take the first movement today, 1 Samuel 26:1-23.

I. The Hunt Intensifies (26:1-4)

Then the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, “Is not David hiding on the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon?” So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph, having with him three thousand chosen men of Israel, to search for David in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul camped in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon, beside the road, while David was staying in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, then David sent out spies, and he knew that Saul was definitely coming. (NASB)

Chapter 26 is filled with visual imagery of height and space. The scene opens on the heights as both kings position themselves to gain the strategic advantage. (The word “Gibeah” means height; it is the same root as the word “hill.”) At first, Saul leaves his high position and descends into the wilderness; then he goes back to the hill of Hachilah. In scene 2, these same spatial movements will be matched carefully and precisely by David.

The chapter reintroduces Saul’s friends, the Ziphites, those skilled spies of his central intelligence agency. Once again they have discovered David’s hiding place. It is on the “hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon”—the same report as in 23:24. The Ziphites freely

offer this information to Saul, using the exact wording of 23:19. This time Saul does not delay. He responds in haste in an effort to capture David. The king gathers three thousand of the choicest men in all Israel, the same group who, ironically, were of little value to him during an earlier pursuit of David. Their mention in the text at this point could be a subtle clue by the narrator that Saul is doomed to failure. Just as in chapter 24, when Saul picked the exact cave where David was hiding to relieve himself, here he chooses to rest his whole camp in the exact location of David's camp, the hill of Hachilah.

"Hachilah" (the word means "dark or dull") is a pun that would not have been lost on a Hebrew audience. The term was used of blurred eyes dulled from drunkenness. This is a clue to the reader that just as drunken Nabal lacked insight to see the Messianic king, neither will Saul be able to see anything from his new vantage point. How true this is can be gauged from the fact that when David arrives in the camp, Saul is in a deep sleep, totally oblivious to David's presence.

Though Saul is shrouded in darkness, the narrator is quick to relate that David is guided by light. He has a sixth sense that Saul is hot on his trail. We are not told how David knows this, though we sense by now that his insight originates from the hand of God, so it is not necessary to document the means. In a tactical move, David sends spies to confirm his intuition, reminiscent of another great leader in Israel (cf. Num 13:1-3).

Once his suspicions are confirmed, David makes a bold move. He sneaks into Saul's camp under the cover of night.

II. The Hunted Becomes the Hunter (26:5-7)

David then arose and came to the place where Saul had camped. And David saw the place where Saul lay, and Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army; and Saul was lying in the circle of the camp, and the people were camped around him. Then David answered and said to Ahimelech the Hittite and to Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, saying, "Who will go down with me to Saul in the camp?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you." So David and Abishai came to the people by night, and behold, Saul lay sleeping inside the circle of the camp, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the people were lying around him.

Once David has located Saul, he decides to change roles. Retaking the initiative, the hunted becomes the hunter. David asks for a volunteer to enter into the enemy camp, and Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, David's sister, steps forward. Stealthily, in the middle of the night, uncle and nephew make their way into Saul's camp. The night is dark and eerie. The scene is deathly silent. The narrator graphically depicts Saul's "sleeping"

camp, carefully arranged in concentric circles, with Saul at the center. Here he lies, to his own misguided thinking, the center of life, with his general, his choice troops and his people all around him.

The imagery suggests a king filled with egocentricity (the whole world revolves around him), and paranoia (it takes the whole world to protect him). David penetrates each line of defense, moving closer and closer to Saul, until he arrives at the center. In the blackness of the night, everyone is in a deep sleep. What David sees is a grave. At center-stage stands Saul's spear, the symbol of death, thrust into the ground next to his skull. To David, this tableau becomes a prophetic symbol of Saul's death.

Abishai is quick to judge the significance of the moment.

III. Circling the Prey (26:8-13)

Then Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time." But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be without guilt?" David also said, "As the Lord lives, surely the Lord will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go." So David took the spear and the jug of water from beside Saul's head, and they went away, but no one saw or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a sound sleep from the Lord had fallen on them. Then David crossed over to the other side, and stood on top of the mountain at a distance with a large area between them.

Abishai catches the vision of death, plain as day. Like a drooling vulture, he hovers over Saul's body. He interprets the events as God giving David his day of opportunity, and is eager to help the prophecy along. David need not kill Saul; he will do it. And with one thrust of Saul's spear, to boot. He will not need a second. How tempting this must have been for David. The very spear, the symbol of death that twice missed its mark when it was thrown at David, stands next to Saul's sleeping skull. Abishai, David's nephew, would do the dirty work. He would not have to thrust it twice!

But once again, as was the case in chapter 24, David is ruled by theology, not circumstances. This theology is imbedded in the very core of David's being. Notice that five times in three verses he uses the name "Lord." Thanks to Abigail, the Lord is back in David's equation. He uses the Lord's name in an oath ("as the Lord lives"); and he uses the most emphatic verbal structure

("surely the LORD will strike him"); finally, the word "forbid" is a term that comes from the root meaning "to pollute, profane, dishonor" (the noun form means that some thing or thought is so profane or reprehensible to the individual that it evokes the deepest human emotions).¹ Right in the middle of the graveyard, Abishai receives from his uncle an impassioned sermon in basic theology. Abigail has had a remarkable influence on David.

David admonishes the bloodthirsty Abishai to restrain his hand. David now senses that just as the Lord struck Nabal, one day the Lord would strike Saul. How, he did not know. Perhaps like Nabal, Saul would die of a stroke; perhaps old age would take him, or he might die in battle. Whatever the circumstances, God would judge, how and when David did not know. That confidence would allow him to wait. Perhaps it was the sight of the sleeping camp, with the spear impaled by Saul's head, coupled with Nabal's death, that nurtured David's hope.

Instead of using the spear to kill Saul, David has Abishai remove the spear and pick up the jug of water by Saul's head. The spear is a symbol of death, and Saul's power; the jug of water is a symbol of life. (Anyone who travels to the wilderness in Israel knows that one must drink five liters of water a day to prevent dehydration.) David knows how to use these two things, a spear and a jug of water. Rather than killing Saul, he is going to give him the gift of life.

As both men depart the camp, the narrator points out the reason for their success: "no one saw or knew [contrast 26:4] for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them." The term "sound sleep"² was used of the deep sleep that God caused to fall upon Adam when he removed his rib (Gen 2:21). It is a sleep that was used by God on someone prior to God's imparting deep revelation (Gen 15:12; Job 4:13; Dan 8:18). In chapter 24 we might say David went unnoticed because he was lucky; here it is clearly because of divine aid that he went unnoticed.

David departs the sleeping camp and removes himself to leave as much space as possible between himself and Saul; yet he remains close enough to be within earshot of the camp. From that point, David will confront Saul and his general with their guilt over their dealings with him.

IV. Reflections: Why 'Deja vu'?

Why does the Lord take David through the same trial he experienced in chapter 24, especially when, in Engedi's cave, David seemed to exhibit perfect trust when he faced Saul? While that is true, it is also true that David had failed miserably in his dispute with Nabal by taking matters into his own hands. In chapter 24, David responded to Saul with what I would call terrified trust, but when he was confronted by a fool, Nabal, in chapter

25, he responded in anger. Is it not possible that the intensity of David's anger toward Nabal is not at least in some measure due to the pain that Saul had caused David? David retained a residue of anger that he held in check for a time. Then, his anger having been diffused by Abigail, God initiated a second face to face confrontation between David and Saul. The lessons of the first story were not merely repeated, but expanded and developed in the second.

As a result of this repetition, David grew in three areas as a leader.

1. David's Courage Is Stronger: The Hunted Becomes the Hunter

First, his courage grew stronger: The hunted becomes the hunter. No longer is David merely responding to Saul's attacks, he turns the tables on Saul and courageously retakes the initiative, entering right into the camp of his enemy. "David intentionally and self-assuredly takes over the initiative and his stalking is premeditated" (Brueggemann). Oftentimes, this is how we grow to be courageous. At first, we respond to confrontation with terrified trust; the second time we respond in anger; but the third time we respond in courageous confrontation. This was what happened with David.

Confrontations are repeated in our lives to teach us to seize the initiative. In the book of Acts, Peter had a face to face confrontation with Annas, the high priest, and Caiaphas, the same people who tried Jesus and put him to death. Back then Peter denied Jesus, but now, following the resurrection, all things have become new. Peter seizes the initiative and puts them on trial. Listen to the apostle's words:

"If we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 'He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone.' And there is salvation in no none else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:9-12)

Peter, the accused, becomes the accuser, summoning his judges before the court of Christ. This takes courage, but this is how God wants his people to respond. Sometimes it takes several encounters to bring this about.

David's courage is stronger.

2. David's Convictions Are Deeper: Rebuke of Abishai, son of Zeruiah

Secondly, David's convictions are deeper. We see this in his rebuke of Abishai. The same theology drives this text as that of chapter 24, but it has twice the passion

and conviction. David's nephew gets far more than he bargained for when he offers to help David by thrusting a spear into Saul. He is barraged with an arsenal of words that penetrate his own heart. We all have our sons of thunder, those who want to bring down fire upon the Lord's enemies. The value of repeated trials is that they teach us passion. We can't be leaders without it. With passion we are able to silence the sons of thunder.

In the wilderness we learn one outstanding lesson, and it is this. If we have a ministry, it is by the gift of God. No one creates his own ministry in the church. If we are going to work with the Messianic King, it is he who grants us ministry. He gives the gifts and sets the stage. But we must learn this lesson a few times in order to gain passion. Let God handle the sword. Our job is to grasp the jug and bring life to thirsting souls.

David's convictions are deeper.

3. Nightly Visions of Encouragement: Hope Is Brighter

Finally, David's hope is brighter. As he walked through Saul's camp in the eerie blackness he observed the highly unusual, deep sleep of everyone in the camp. Then he saw the sword thrust into the ground next to Saul's skull. David realized that he was walking in a graveyard. He had seen how everything would end. It had been decreed. Saul was finished. His reign was over.

David's vision came right on the heels of Nabal's death. This, coupled with God's vindication of him in the matter with Nabal, gave birth to his hope. God would judge. Yet, notice that David will express only what has been clearly revealed to him, nothing more.

He is not presumptuous. Christians today presume far too much. David ventures nothing more than what the Lord has taught him. Saul would die, either by the direct intervention of the Lord, through old age or in battle. How he would die David did not know, but die he would.

May God give us such a hope, coupled with humility, not to take the Lord's name in vain.

The day after my daughter died, for some strange reason hope was born in me. It was not the hope of wishful thinking, neither was it a denial of my grief. My hope was a mysterious beckoning within me that God was up to something. When we arrived home from the hospital, I told Emily that we should not put our baby furniture away, We were going to pray for a baby, I said. God would provide, how or when I did not know, but he would provide. Next morning we received word that a young woman who was due to give birth the very next day, wanted us to adopt her baby. On December 18th, two weeks after Jessica died, we adopted Becki. Our lives would never be the same again.

Last week, Becki brought home her senior portraits from high school. How quickly the years have flown! There was a time when I thought we would never have children, but today, eighteen years later, thirty seniors from Becki's high school class are building their homecoming float in my driveway. Becki has always made our lives new.

My friends, do not be discouraged if God repeats a trial in your life. Do not regard it as a rerun. It is a sign that his hand is upon you, and he is about to make all things new.

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1. The term is also used also of God in Genesis 18:17, when Abraham asked if he would destroy Sodom if fifty righteous men remained. His response: "*Far be it from me!* Will not the judge of all the world do what is right?" For other uses see 1 Sam 2:30; 14:45; 20:2, 9; 22:15; 26:11; 2 Sam 20:20; 23:17.

2. For a complete listing of this term as a noun, see Gen 2:21; 15:12; Isa 29:10; Job 4:13; 33:15; Prov 19:15; as a verb, see Judg 4:21; Jonah 1:5, 6; Ps 76:7; Prov 10:5; Dan 8:18; 10:9.