



ECHOES OF ACCUSATION AND INNOCENCE

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 26:14-25
Twentieth Message
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On a warm summer evening in Romania in 1989, Claudia, a young girl from a devoutly atheistic home, had a disturbing dream. A week earlier, her friend had invited her to act as an interpreter for a team of foreigners who would soon be arriving in her village. This would be a dangerous undertaking. Contact with foreigners was forbidden by law. Her whole family was Communist, while these foreigners were Christians. Acting as their interpreter would be tantamount to treason. Her family, especially her sister, regarded the venture with great suspicion. They could easily have turned her over to the authorities. What should she do?

In her dream, Claudia was sitting in a chair in her living room. Behind her was standing a man with a beard. His outstretched arms beckoned to her. The dream made a deep impression on her. She took the risk, joined the foreigners, and headed up to the mountains for a week of Bible teaching. Never before had she heard of the name Jesus, but now she was translating amazing words from the Bible, coming from the lips of a foreigner. This man's words were striking, but she was taken even more by his obvious integrity. She returned home, bubbling over with new life, singing the songs she had learned during the week. A few months after the Romanian revolution, Claudia and her sister came to Christ. She is now a full-time missionary, working for Operation Mobilization. The "foreigner" she interpreted for was our own Bill Kiefer. I will never forget seeing the reunion of these two at Jim Foster's wedding. Claudia's dream that summer evening was the catalyst that had drawn her to Christ.

This is a not a rare phenomenon. In Scripture, God frequently used deep sleep¹ to communicate to people who were alone, quiet and vulnerable in the deep of night. Elihu says as much in the book of Job:

"For God does speak—now one way, now another—
though man may not perceive it.
In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their
beds,
he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warn-
ings,
to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride,
to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing
by the sword" (Job 33:14-18).

In our text this morning on the life of David from the book of 1 Samuel, Saul encounters God in a dream. These last two scenes in chapter 26 climax David's final confrontation with Saul in the wilderness. In our last study we saw that David changed roles: the hunted became the hunter. Aided by the divine sleep which enveloped the camp of Saul, David and his nephew, Abishai, invaded the slumbering camp and captured the spear and the jug of

water that stood by Saul's head. The two then escaped to a high vantage point, a safe distance from Saul. From that place, David confronted his nemesis.

What follows is what I have called "Echoes of Accusation and Innocence," as the speeches of the two kings reverberate back and forth across the canyon walls. In full view of both armies, the guilt of one king and the innocence of the other are revealed as plain as day. From David's point of view, in this text we learn the skill of confrontation in the kingdom of God and the freedom that results from that: we learn how to disarm our enemies and secure their confession. From Saul's point of view we learn that the relentless God never gives up his pursuit of us until we freely acknowledge our guilt and the innocence of his Messiah. What we do as a result of that confrontation, of course, determines our eternal destiny.

David's first speech, uttered from the safety of his vantage point, is addressed, surprisingly, to Abner, Saul's general.

I. Echoes of Accusation (26:14-20)

And David called to the people and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Will you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner answered and said, "Who are you who calls to the king?" So David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the people came to destroy the king your lord. This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, all of you must surely die, because you did not guard your Lord, the Lord's anointed. And now, see where the king's spear is, and the jug of water that was at his head." (NASB)

Standing at a safe distance, on ground that was higher than Saul's, David condemns Abner for his failure to protect Saul. The genius of David's speech is that he not only indicts Abner for not protecting the king, but by implication he indicts Abishai, who earlier wanted to kill Saul, and also Saul's army (v 8).

David's language takes the form of a legal indictment. It is structured thus:²

(a) First, the person of the accused is introduced

"Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel?"

(b) The charge is given against him

"Why then have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the people came to destroy the king your Lord ...you did not guard your lord..."

(c) The failure is then judged

"This thing that you have done is not good."

(d) Sentence is passed and ratified by an oath

“As the Lord lives, all of you must surely die, because you did not guard your lord, the Lord’s anointed.”

(e) Finally, the condemned man may collect the evidence himself

“And now, see where the king’s spear is, and the jug of water that was at his head.”

This scene, played out in full view of both armies, publicly exposes the impotence of Abner and the superiority of David.

But why does David implicate Abner when Saul is his real target? Here we learn that the best way to reach someone is not to come knocking on the front door in a confrontation; it is much more effective to sneak in the back door in a surprise attack. I once heard Ray Stedman counsel a man who was bothered by the legalism which the man was encountering in the church he attended. Ray asked how he was responding. The man answered that he raised his hand in Sunday School to give another opinion, but he got shot down. Ray smiled and said, “You’re like Don Quixote tilting at the windmills. The way to destroy the windmills of tradition is not to confront them straight on; you’ll just get knocked off your horse. But what you can do is get a group of commandos together, sneak inside, and blow the place up!”

David’s words to Abner subtly but powerfully implicate Saul. The phrase, “you have not guarded,” echoes a previous accusation by Samuel, thus they have a special sting to them: “You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you”; “You have not kept what the Lord commanded you” (1 Sam 13:13-14). “The double ‘you have not watched’ hits a sore spot in his memory: The unguarded king is thus at the same time the already rejected king” (Fokkelman). We can almost hear these words echoing in Saul’s heart. Part of the curriculum of the school of spiritual formation is that when we hear someone being indicted, oftentimes we must face the fact that we too are guilty. I have had experience of this. Someone was being charged with something, but God used the occasion to point out to me that I too was guilty of the same failure.

Saul, awakening from his deep sleep, now addresses David.

II. Echoes of Innocence (26:17-20)

Then Saul recognized David’s voice and said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” And David said, “It is my voice, my lord the king.” He also said, “Why then is my lord pursuing his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? Now therefore, please let my lord the king listen to the words of his servant. If the Lord has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering; but if it is men, cursed are they before the Lord for they have driven me out today that I should have no attachment with the inheritance of the Lord, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods.’ Now then, do not let my blood fall to the ground away from the presence of the Lord; for the king of Israel has come out to search for a single flea, just as one hunts a partridge in the mountains.”

The king is startled from his sleep. Half awake, with his

guard down, he begins by expressing his hidden affections for David. He says, “Is this your voice, my son?” This mode of address is a clue that Saul will acknowledge David as the rightful heir to his throne.

Now that he has Saul’s full attention, David presses the issue, probing the king with questions regarding his innocence. He asks, “Why are you pursuing me? What have I done? What evil...?” These words, which were used by Jonathan in 20:32, are painful echoes of Saul’s past. Back then, Saul hurled his spear; this time, however, David has the spear. Now, using language reminiscent of Abigail’s speech, David begs for a hearing from the king so that he can plead his case. He presents Saul with two possibilities for why he was pursuing him. The source must be either God or men. David says, “If it is the Lord, then let’s put an end to it, since he will accept an offering. If it is men, then they are under the curse of God, since they have driven me out of the land so I am unable to worship God” (see Deut 13:2).

Notice again the power of indirect speech. The motivating force behind Saul’s pursuit is neither God nor man; it is Saul himself. By being indirect, David gives Saul an out. Thus he allows him the freedom of self discovery, and elicits an uncoerced confession for his pains. This is the best way to handle someone who is defensive. Give them an out. By doing so you will give them room to discover who they really are.

David concludes by pleading with Saul to stop pursuing him. He claims that he is as insignificant as a single flea or a small partridge. The analogy has more to it than meets the eye, however. “Partridge” comes from the same Hebrew consonant as the verb, “to call.” This is an interesting play on words by the man who “stood on the top of the hill and called” (26:14). I discovered this interesting insight in an excellent book that I read during my recent trip to Israel:

The flea is notorious for its huge leaps, jumping freely between animal and human, annoying both and exceedingly difficult to catch. David must have tried, probably without much success, to kill the fleas that annoyed him in the caves where he hid...The mountain partridge is a desert bird...familiar to all hikers in the Judean Desert, especially in the area of Ein Gedi. Its coloring blends with the ground and the stones, so it is extremely difficult to spot unless it moves and sounds its unusual calls. When it feels danger approaching, it immediately takes flight very close to ground level and disappears among the rocks or behind a hummock...The picture David paints for Saul contains a double message: while emphasizing what a lightweight he is in comparison to the king of Israel, David increases Saul’s frustration by comparing his futile pursuit to trying to catch the flea or the mountain partridge, both of which are champions at quick, evasive action and skipping from one hiding place to another.³

With these echoes of accusations and innocence reverberating in his soul, Saul finally relents and makes a full confession of his sin.

III. True Confessions (26:21-25)

(a) Saul gives a confession to David (26:21)

Then Saul said, “I have sinned. Return, my son David,

for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error."

Fokkelman points out that this is the seventh and last time that Saul's sinning is the theme (15:23,23,30; 19:4,5). He admits playing the fool (finally agreeing with Samuel's accusation in 13:13), and promises to leave David alone, because David had treated his life as precious. But his repentance is like that of a child who is caught doing something wrong and blurts, "I'll never do it again!" Interestingly, Saul says, "Return, my son David." Notice that the text ends in verse 25 with the words, "Saul returned to his place." "Return" also means "repent" in Hebrew—something which Saul, ironically, never does. He admits that he has sinned, but he asks David to change his behavior. Saul said exactly the same thing to Samuel in 15:24-25: "I sinned...please...return with me." The text ends with the words, "Saul returned to his place." He has confessed, but he has not repented.

David's response follows.

(b) David invokes the LORD to do right (26:22-24)

And David answered and said, "Behold the spear of the king! Now let one of the young men come over and take it. And the Lord will repay (lit: return) each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the Lord delivered you into my hand today, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed. Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the Lord, and may He deliver me from all distress."

Fokkelman comments: "David answers Saul's 'behold' with 'behold the king's spear', meaning, 'No, I'm not returning.' There is no mention of the water jug, perhaps signifying he no longer wishes to refresh Saul by in any way feeding his illusions concerning a new cooperation." The return of Saul's spear signifies that his life is drawing to a close. (We are reminded of the opening scene with David and Saul, when David returns the king's armor, which he deemed unnecessary in the battle of faith.)

Then David confesses (four times in two verses) his trust in the Lord to return justice in this matter. Consciously, he omits Saul's name from the equation. The result is that David is set free in his spirit. He does not change his behavior in order to be vindicated; the Lord will vindicate him. There is tremendous emotional detachment between the two kings as they go their separate ways.

Saul's last words to David take the form of a blessing.

(c) Saul gives a blessing to David (26:25)

Then Saul said to David, "Blessed are you, my son David; you will both accomplish much and surely prevail." So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.

Here, in Saul's final words to David, he willingly gives him the crown. In the strongest Hebrew possible, David secures the blessing and the promise from the reigning king. What a holy moment for David. He had never sought to take the crown, yet now, in full view of both armies, he is crowned king by the rejected Saul.

III. Reflections on Echoes of Accusation and

Innocence

There is a lesson to be learned from each of three major players in the text, David, Saul, and God.

(a) David: Freedom of Confrontation

At last David has grown to the point where he is able to confront his enemy. Remember that David and his nephew had gone into the camp by night. The lesson is obvious: when we have to confront someone, we don't need an army; just ourselves and one other will do. If we barrage our enemies with an army of protest, we will never get close enough to them to secure a confession. We must wait until they are vulnerable, and then approach them alone, or in company with one other—and, of course, the Lord.

Secondly, notice that it is an act of grace, not angry demands, that prepares the ground for the confrontation to come. David discovered Saul asleep and vulnerable, yet he protected him from harm and refreshed him with life (symbolized by the jug of water). This is what loving our enemies is all about. In the New Testament, Peter commends this kind of response as the model for winning people to Christ. When you have done right and yet are wronged by someone, you have grounds to repay evil with good. The result is that you will receive a hearing to share the gospel.

Thirdly, confrontation has a freeing effect on us spiritually. This confrontation frees David to distance himself emotionally from Saul. He refuses to play on Saul's terms (and he will not play in his court), and refuses to believe Saul's promises of a change of heart. At the end, David doesn't even use Saul's name for his vindication. God, not Saul, would vindicate him. That is freedom indeed. Once when I was counseling a young couple to prepare them for marriage, the woman told me she felt repulsed by the thought of her father walking her down the aisle. She sensed that she might have been abused by him. She felt she had to confront him about this, so she and her fiance spoke to him about it. The father did not admit he had abused her, but neither did he deny it. In the confrontation, however, she was able to distance herself emotionally from him and free herself. The thing that was beneficial to her was not her father's response; it was the Lord who would heal her. This is the freedom that confrontation brings.

(b) Saul: Tragedy of Confession without Repentance

I find it intriguing that although David gets a full and detailed confession from Saul, he still does not trust him. Saul is proof positive that confession in and of itself does not constitute repentance. In earlier days Saul was moved to tears by David's skillful playing of the harp, but in the very next scene he threw a spear at David. Here in their final meeting, Saul makes a full, orthodox confession. He makes full disclosure of his sin, followed with an admission of who the true Messianic king is, yet at the end he "returns to his place." He had not truly repented. Perhaps this is why David would later write these words in Psalm 4:

Tremble and stop sinning,
Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still.
Offer sacrifices of righteousness,
And trust in the Lord (Ps 4:4-5).

David was rebuking the Israelites for their idolatry, but

rather than have them come forward and make an emotional confession, he made them go home and meditate in their beds. Having done business with God in the stillness of the night, they then could come forward in the morning and offer sacrifices.

At our newcomers class a couple of weeks ago, a man asked why we don't have altar calls in our church. I told him that I thought there was nothing wrong with altar calls, but in the New Testament it was not altar calls but baptism that was the true expression of repentance and initiation into the body of Christ. In the NT, if someone was serious about the claims of Christ, then the word to him was, "Repent, and be baptized." An emotional response and confession in themselves were not enough. First, one had to count the cost. Later, at baptism, one could make confession for sins. I have seen many people make confession only to return to their former ways, because they had never truly repented.

Thus from Saul we learn about true confession and repentance. We also learn that no one is condemned to hell except on the conviction of their own words. Saul's own confession sent him to the grave, abandoned by God.

(c) God: The Hound of Heaven

And what do we learn of God in this text? We learn that he is the "hound of heaven." God is relentless in his pursuit of us. Though Saul is adamant in his opposition of God's rule, God keeps pursuing him. Saul kept his guard up by day but, when night inevitably came, God presented to him his Messiah. While Saul slept, the Messianic king approached him on his bed and stared into his face. But he came bringing words of grace, not judgment.

Francis Thompson, in his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, describes God's relentless pursuit in these words:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine way
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperterbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—

God wants us to behold the innocence of his Messiah, and to admit our guilt. But he knows how defensive we are. That is why he comes to us gently and indirectly. He reveals the misdeeds of others, but then our souls are forced to agree that we too are guilty. As we awaken from our dream-like state, we find Christ, in all his love, beckoning us, "Arise, clasp my hand, and come!"

This is what happened to one of my closest friends. Some years ago he awoke from sleep at 1:32 in the morning. He had a sense that God was there in the room with him, beckoning him to come. He awoke to such love that his resistance melted away and he gave his soul to Christ

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this,
That caused the Lord of bliss
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul.*

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1. "sound sleep": this is the deep sleep that God used on Adam to remove his rib (Gen 2:21). It is often used by God prior to deep revelation (Gen 15:12; Job 4:13; Dan. 8:18). 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.

2. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 2, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986), 542.

3. Nogah Hareuveni, *Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage* (Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1992), 148.