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1 Samuel 29:1-11

23rd Message

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# TIME TO COME HOME

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

In our last study on the life of David, King Saul was eating his final meal in the company of the witch at En-dor. This morning we return to the story of David. Having grown weary of life on the run, David has abandoned his place of protection under the sheltering wings of God in Judah, and fled to a man-made city among the Philistines. For more than a year he has been living on the razor's edge, acting as a double agent under the sharp eye of Achish, king of Gath. Surprisingly, David seems to escape not only his own moral lapses but, like the patriarchs of old, Abraham and Isaac (who also dwelt as aliens with Abimelech, in Gerar), in the midst of oppression he is actually becoming a rich man.

It is now the eve of the great battle. Tension mounts as the Philistines prepare to face off once more with King Saul and his Israelite armies. David, of course, is now incorporated in the Philistine army. How will the Lord rescue this wayward son and bring him home? Our text, chapter 29 of 1 Samuel, is a wonderful testimony to the grace of God, who keeps pursuing his wayward children even when they try to run away from him.<sup>1</sup> How many people could offer testimony to this all-pursuing grace!

The text opens with a debate among the Philistines as to David's real identity.

## I. A Philistine Debate: Angel or Adversary? (29:1-5)

**Now the Philistines gathered together all their armies to Aphek, while the Israelites were camping by the spring which is in Jezreel. (1 Sam 29:1 NASB)**

First, the narrator identifies the locations of the opposing armies on the eve of battle. The Philistines have seized the military initiative, while the Israelite army responds in a defensive posture. Yohan-an Aharoni, in *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, gives us further insight:

[T]he Philistines rallied at Aphek [about a day's march north of Philistia] in the Sharon plain, as was their custom when venturing upon campaigns to the north; from there the Philistines advanced to Shunem at the foot of the hill of Moreh, while Saul deployed his army opposite them on Mount Gilboa, favoring the mountainous area as more convenient for his lightly armed Israelite warriors. He encamped at a spring at the foot of Jezreel: it was from here that Saul went to the medium of En-dor in the darkness of night.<sup>2</sup>

Having set the geographical context, the narrator next takes us to view the Philistine military parade, a procession replete with ceremonial trappings and hardware. The Philistines are marching in squadrons, an intimidating sight, not unlike the military parades in Moscow's Red Square in the time of the Cold War. Verse 2:

**And the lords of the Philistines were proceeding on by hundreds and by thousands, and David and his men were proceeding on in the rear with Achish. Then the commanders of the Philistines said, "What are these Hebrews doing here?" And Achish said to**

**the commanders of the Philistines, "Is this not David, the servant of Saul the king of Israel, who has been with me these days, or rather these years, and I have found no fault in him from the day he deserted to me to this day?" (29:2-3)**

Here the narrator lets us listen in on a conversation between the Philistine commanders officiating at the ceremony. Some of the generals react rather forcefully when they see David and his men bringing up the rear of the regiments. "Is there a sting in the tail?" they wonder.<sup>3</sup> "What are those *Hebrews* doing here?" they demand. There is a definite word play in the text. The word "Hebrews" contains the exact same consonants as the words "proceeding" or "crossing over." Brueggemann comments,

"Hebrews" may also contain a derogatory reference to the scavengers who disrupt Philistine order and who threaten Philistine well-being and prosperity. The term most likely refers to those who are socially marginal and economically disadvantaged, who pose a constant threat to society. In all probability David had developed a reputation as a scavenger (cf. 22:2; 25:10), so that the Philistine characterization of David refers to his Israelite connection and to his social marginality.<sup>4</sup>

On hearing the complaint of the generals, Achish takes the initiative to set the record straight. But he is rather inept in presenting his case. Instead of setting the commanders at ease by saying, "these Judaeans have been in service with me for a year or more already and have fought toughly in campaigns against Judah and Kain, so you needn't worry! I take full responsibility for their loyalty,"<sup>5</sup> Achish draws attention to David at the front of the line, pouring fuel on the fire. "Is this not David," he says, "who once was the slave of Saul, but since their falling out is now my slave?" Achish always views David in terms of a slave/master relationship.

But the generals are not impressed by Achish's assessment of David's loyalty. Verse 4:

**But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with him, and the commanders of the Philistines said to him, "Make the man go back [return], that he may return to his place where you have assigned him, and do not let him go down to battle with us, lest in the battle he become an adversary [satan] to us. For with what could this man make himself acceptable to his lord? Would it not be with the heads of these men? "Is this not David, of whom they sing in the dances, saying,**

**'Saul has slain his thousands,  
And David his ten thousands?'" (29:4-5)**

When the commanders hear the name David, they become outraged, and order his immediate "return." This word marks the turning point of the scene. Their rage over David's presence among the ranks precludes any possibility of rebuttal by Achish. They issue the order first ("return"), then they back it up with reasons. The generals have a better memory than Achish. They are not at all impressed with

what David has done in the past eighteen months. What concerns them are David's earlier accomplishments. Was he not the youth who had beheaded Goliath, and of whom the women of Israel sang, "David has slain his ten thousands"? They feared that in the heat of battle David would turn on them and become their "adversary."

This word "adversary," transliterated as *satan*, would later be used in Hebrew theology as a title for Satan. The Philistine generals feared that David would do to them what he had done to Goliath. They felt that David could possibly court Saul's favor again, not with one head this time, but with ten thousand heads! Now we see what an impact that song of praise by the women of Israel had on Philistia. Thus, "Achish's conviction that David 'has made himself absolutely impossible with his own people' is undermined by the military perception that 'this fellow can buy his master's favor.'"<sup>6</sup> Achish is left with the unpleasant task of relating this "bad" news to David, and dismissing his loyal friend, all because he himself must submit to the "powers that be."

This brings us to the second scene in the drama. Here we find Achish reasoning with David.

## II. Achish's Polite Dismissal of David (29:6-11)

**Then Achish called David and said to him, "As the LORD lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the army are pleasing in my sight; for I have not found evil in you from the day of your coming to me to this day. Nevertheless, you are not pleasing in the sight of the lords. Now therefore return, and go in peace, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines." (29:6-7)**

"Achish acquits himself of the onerous task of dismissing the vassal in whom he believes, not only by praising David in detail, but also by adapting himself to David's perspective at the beginning and end."<sup>7</sup> Achish even takes a vow to David's God that David has been upright all his days with Achish. But nonetheless, he must submit to the powers that be, and do the unpleasant task of dismissing his loyal friend. "The only thing that Achish can now do to sugar the pill is to add 'go in peace.' Just like David, the reader hears an irony in this, for the true David is only too glad to be spared a terrible dilemma."<sup>8</sup> If David were to go into battle, of course, he would have had to choose between two impossibilities: going to war and partaking in killing King Saul, and thus disqualifying himself from the kingdom of Israel, or defecting back to Israel in the heat of battle and joining ranks with Saul, the very one who wanted to kill him! For David, either scenario was impossible, unthinkable.

How would David respond to Achish's reluctant dismissal of him? If he were to appear relieved, that would be a dead giveaway. He can't shrug his shoulders and mutter, "What a pity. But I understand; it can't be helped." Instead, the accomplished actor plays the part of the outraged innocent. Verse 8:

**And David said to Achish, "But what have I done? And what have you found in your servant from the day when I came before you to this day, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?" (29:8)**

Achish, feeling a bit threatened by this outburst, takes the pressure off David with a little flattery and a smile. Verse 9:

**But Achish answered and said to David, "I know that you are pleasing in my sight, like an angel of God; nevertheless the commanders of the Philistines have said, 'He must not go up with**

**us to the battle.' Now then arise early in the morning with the servants of your lord who have come with you, and as soon as you have arisen early in the morning and have light, depart." So David arose early, he and his men, to depart in the morning, to return to the land of the Philistines. And the Philistines went up to Jezreel. (29:9-11)**

In contrast to the view of the Philistine generals who regard David as a potential adversary, Achish compares him to "an angel of God." To Achish, David is an angel of God; to the generals, he is the devil in disguise. Yet Achish must compel David to return—and return in haste. So he adds the lengthy statement, "Return, and be quick about it. Make haste in the morning light." While the previous story ends with one king exiting the home of a witch, into the darkness of night, this story ends with another king passing unscathed through a dark tunnel, into the morning light. One king is projected for death, the other for life, and a new reign. So the Philistines head north to Jezreel, while David marches south, back to Ziklag.

This text describes how God sets about getting a wayward son or daughter to return home. I will make three reflections on this story. As we will see, there is much to encourage us here if we find ourselves living in a foreign land.

## III. Reflections: Finding Our Way Home

### (A) A Vision of God's Reign to Encourage Us

In our text, the narrator transports us to the strategic high command of the Philistine generals. There we overhear their conversation concerning the identity of a certain Jew whom they sense had infiltrated their ranks. We listen to the intense debate and sense the opposing emotions in the controversy created by this Hebrew. Who is this David? the generals ask. Is this Jew, who has defected from Saul and now serves Achish, king of Gath, faithful to the Philistines, or is he a subversive interloper, a double agent who poses a threat to the nation? Three times in the debate, Achish insists that David is innocent, saying, "I find no fault in him" (vv. 3, 6, 9). But Achish does not prevail; the majority view wins out. David is deemed a subversive, a potential threat to the Philistine campaign, and he is dismissed. The verdict of the generals is clear: send him home at once.

Why are we privileged to hear this conversation among the commanders of the Philistines? And what is the lesson for us? Here is yet another clue in the story of David that Israel's Messianic King was not going to be some trifling national ruler, but rather, God's representative on earth. As such he would subvert and overcome all other kingdoms, rulers and authorities. Thus we learn the identity of the real power behind history. It is God's Messianic King.

The same was true of Jesus, the greater Son of David. He, too, was a threat to the powers that be, just as he is today. He had to work to keep his identity secret until the proper time. When the demons tried to reveal who he was, he silenced them with a command. Even then, when he confronted the forces of darkness and cast out demons, there arose a great controversy as to his identity. The rulers of Israel wondered was this Jesus the "Son of David," or was he a demon in disguise, under the authority of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons (Matt 12:23-24).

But, as the story of David among the Philistines is reshaped in the life of Jesus, the debate takes place, not among the enemies of Israel, but within Israel itself. The debate escalated, the divisions became more clear cut, until at last Jesus was tried before Pilate. Was he a threat or not? Was he an adversary, or a messenger from God? In an

erie echo of the words of Achish, three times Pilate acquitted him, saying, “I find no fault in this man” (Luke 23:4, 14-15, 22; John 18:38; 19:4). Walter Brueggemann explains:

We may wonder if Pilate, like Achish, worked from misleading data about Jesus. It is possible that the subtle narrative of David’s “trial” before the Philistines is echoed in the Gospel account of Jesus’ trial. In Jesus’ trial, as in that of David, there is a strange rendering of Jesus’ innocence and guilt. Jesus also is innocent, but, read another way, he is indeed guilty of the charges brought against him that he subverts the establishment. As with David, however, the people around Jesus did not regard such subversiveness as a fault, but as a cause for celebration and loyalty. The people were as celebrative of Jesus as they were earlier of David.<sup>9</sup>

God allowed David to hear the controversy, the fear, panic and dread his identity had caused the powers that be. God does this for his wayward children to give them hope and confidence. In the words of the psalmist,

**It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
Than to trust in man.**

**It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
Than to trust in princes. (Ps 118:8-9)**

The Messianic King had come to introduce his new world order. This was the vision that God gave to David by means of the debate among the Philistines.

#### (b) The Decisive Hand of God to Extricate Us

**“Make the man *return*, that he may *return* to his place.”**

“The David who is in a profound dilemma at the outset of the chapter is, by the end of the chapter, extricated, unscathed, and well thought of by all parties.”<sup>10</sup> What lay behind David’s extrication? Was it his own cunning and skill? No. David was rescued by the sovereign grace and mercy of God, not his own scheming. He came out smelling like a rose from this disastrous scenario simply because God was with him (Rom 8:28). The anointed of God could not partake in a Philistine campaign against Saul, the other “anointed” of the Lord.

What an awesome example of God’s overriding care and skill to extricate his servant from a potentially disastrous situation! God allowed David to go into a foreign land, but only so far. Is it any wonder that Israel “had no doubt David’s future was wrought by the God of Israel, who need not be mentioned in every narrative in order to be decisively present.”<sup>11</sup>

God may be orchestrating certain events in your life today, battles in which you have no part. If you were to become involved you could possibly damage your reputation, your soul—your very life. God knows that. That is why he extricates us from these situations, to our bitter disappointment at times. But the eye of faith sees the sovereign hand of God at work behind the circumstances. We make decisions, using our minds and wills, but God retains his freedom to play the trump card. What a gracious God he is! We ought to trust him more.

In New Testament times, Christians had such a keen sense of God’s sovereign hand controlling the affairs of men that they had no trouble submitting to those in authority over them. In A.D. 50, the Emperor Claudius issued an edict forcing the Jews to leave Rome. One couple, Priscilla and Aquila, ended up in Corinth as a result. They began to ply their trade as tent-makers, and one day they found themselves working alongside a tentmaker named Paul. The apostle

led them to Christ, and instructed them in the Scriptures for eighteen months. Priscilla and Aquila, one of the choice couples in the NT, went on to found churches in several cities in Asia Minor, all because a Gentile king ordered their affairs and sent them away from their home.

My wife and I learned this lesson early in our marriage. We had everything planned out for our future. I was an intern at PBC at the time, and Emily planned on getting her teaching credential at San Jose State University. Afterwards, we would move to Texas, where I would attend seminary and Emily would teach. Then, after I graduated, we would start our family. But God had better plans. My wife was refused admission to San Jose State because they misplaced her records. She was told to reapply the following year. We actually wept because all our plans seemed to be falling apart. But all the while God was protecting us. The next year we lost a baby son. We needed to be among friends, not thousands of miles away, at this difficult time in our lives. The university had lost my wife’s transcript, yes, but God was at work behind the scenes, guiding our path all the while.

#### (c) The Voice of God to Speak to Us

When Achish ordered David to leave, David protested his innocence and asked what had he done. As we have seen, Achish responded with flattery, a smile, and then an emphatic order. Verse 9:

**But Achish answered and said to David, “I know that you are pleasing in my sight, like an angel of God; nevertheless the commanders of the Philistines have said, ‘He must not go up with us to the battle.’ Now then arise early in the morning with the servants of your lord who have come with you, and as soon as you have arisen early in the morning and have light, depart.” (29:9-10)**

Behind these seemingly ordinary words of an irreligious gentile king lay the powerful, unrelenting voice of God, reminding David of who he was. Each word may seem insignificant in itself, but together they created a powerful resonance in David’s soul. Two times the command “Return” was given by the lords of the Philistines to David. “Go home David,” they were saying, “you are in the wrong place.” The Hebrew word that is translated “return” is the same verb as “repent.” Perhaps this was a subtle reminder to David that he was not where he was supposed to be.

When David heard Achish say that he was like an “angel of God,” perhaps these words evoked the memory of the last time he was in Gath. Then he feigned madness before Achish, and God extruded him out. Later, David would write, in the words of Psalm 34, “the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him” (34:7). Now he heard these very words, “angel of God,” uttered by Achish, in reference to himself. Can there be any doubt that they reminded him of his true identity?

Finally, David is told to “arise” at dawn’s early light and make haste to leave. The verb “arise,” which carries the notion of diligence, earnestness, persistence and eagerness, is significant in the Hebrew Scriptures. Oftentimes it is used of arising early to get a good start on a long journey in response to a revelation from God, or in order to worship God. Morning is the time of God’s justice. When Abraham received revelation from God to sacrifice his son, he arose early in the morning in response to holy orders. Jacob rose early to worship God after his vision of the heavenly ladder, at Bethel. Joshua rose early to worship, and carry out holy war against Jericho (Gen 22:3;

Exod 24:4; Josh 6:12). David himself had written in Psalm 5 about this notion of arising early:

**In the morning, O LORD, Thou wilt hear my voice;  
In the morning I will order my prayer to Thee and eagerly watch.  
(Ps 5:3)**

In Achish's repeated use of this phrase, "arise...early in the morning," God was telling David in no uncertain terms that he was on holy orders to go home—immediately! After David made an alliance with worldly powers for his protection he stopped speaking to God (there is no mention of prayer in chapter 27), but though David had stopped speaking to God in a foreign land, God did not stop speaking to him. Perhaps it was this incident that inspired David to write later:

**Where can I go from Thy Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from Thy presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there;  
If I make by bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn,  
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea [in the west: Philistia],  
Even there Thy hand will lead me,  
And Thy right hand will lay hold me. (Ps 139:7-10)**

These then are the three gifts of grace that God gives to his children who abandon the protection of his wings for an unholy alliance with the world:

A vision of the reign of God to encourage us...  
The hand of God to direct us and overrule us...  
The voice of God to speak to us.

Are you living in a foreign land today? You may be here in body, but your spirit is elsewhere. If this is where you are seeking refuge, the voice of God is calling out to you, as it did to David on that day when he was found among the Philistines, "My son, it is time to come home."

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1. For my observations on this text I am heavily indebted to the excellent work by J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 569-578.

2. Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1993), 75.

3. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 570.

4. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 197.

5. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 571.

6. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 574.

7. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 575.

8. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 576.

9. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 200.

10. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 199.

11. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 200.