

The Life of David

David Pursued by Saul

1 Samuel 23:15-29

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Scripture

In our study of the life of David, we are now following David as a fugitive on the run from King Saul. Initially, David's faith in the Lord was superseded by his fear of Saul. But then David came to realize that God was sovereignly watching over him. As a result, David's trust in the Lord grew. He sought the Lord's guidance in different circumstances. Then we read how David was once again pursued by Saul. But we also see God's providence toward him.

Let's read 1 Samuel 23:15-29:

¹⁵ David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. ¹⁶ And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God. ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this." ¹⁸ And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.

¹⁹ Then the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon?" ²⁰ Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand." ²¹ And Saul said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me. ²² Go, make yet more sure. Know and see the place where his foot is, and who has seen him there, for it is told me that he is very cunning. ²³ See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah." ²⁴ And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul.

Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon. ²⁵ And Saul and his men went to seek him. And David was told, so he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon. ²⁶ 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. As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, ²⁷ a messenger came to Saul, saying, “Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land.” ²⁸ So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape. ²⁹ And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi. (1 Samuel 23:15-29)

Introduction

In his book *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, John Piper offers these thoughts about God’s providence:

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.¹

David had been anointed by the Prophet Samuel as the future king over Israel as a teenager. But rather than have a life leading from one blessing to the next, David experienced “a winding

¹ John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 101-102.

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and troubled road” (to use Piper’s phrase). King Saul was insanely jealous over David, and sought strenuously to hunt him down and have him killed. As I mentioned, initially, David’s faith in the Lord was superseded by his fear of Saul. But then David came to realize that God was sovereignly watching over him. As a result, David’s trust in the Lord grew. And, as David saw more and more of God’s providential care toward him, his faith grew even more.

Lesson

First Samuel 23:15-29 shows us how God providentially cares for believers.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. God Provides Encouragement When Needed (23:15-18)
2. God Provides Protection When Needed (23:19-29)

I. God Provides Encouragement When Needed (23:15-18)

First, God provides encouragement when needed.

When we last left David, he had heard that the Philistines were fighting against the city of Keilah, which was near the border of the Philistia (23:1). After inquiring of the Lord, and receiving his affirmation, David went and saved the inhabitants of Keilah (23:2-5). Then David heard that Saul had learned that he was in Keilah (23:7). David again inquired of the Lord, and the Lord directed him to get out of Keilah. David left Keilah and remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph (23:8-14).

A. The Threat (23:15)

First, let’s notice the threat.

Verse 15 says, **“David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh.”** **Horesh** was a place in the desert-like wilderness about 5 miles southwest of Ziph. It was quite easy to hide in the caves in the mountains of that region, even though there were now about 600 men in David’s army (cf. 23:13).

It is likely that David was discouraged because **Saul had come out to seek his life**. How would you feel if you have been on the run from someone who was not merely mad at you but actually wanted to kill you?

B. The Friendship (23:16-18)

And second, let’s look at the friendship.

Saul could not find David but, ironically, **Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Horesh** (23:16a). Of course, David would have had his scouts watching for anyone approaching his hideout, and as soon as they saw that it was **Jonathan** approaching, they would have taken him to David.

We have previously noted the very close friendship between **Jonathan** and **David**. In fact, they were best friends. Proverbs 17:7a says, “A friend loves at all times.” How glad David would have been to see his dear friend at a time when he was discouraged. Moreover, Jonathan understood that God had chosen David as the future king of Israel, and he gladly submitted himself to the Lord’s will and to David’s leadership.

The writer of the Book of Samuel tells how Jonathan encouraged David. He said that Jonathan **“strengthened his [that is, David’s] hand in God”** (23:16b). That is an interesting expression. Commentator John Woodhouse writes:

This is the seventh time we have seen the word “hand” in this chapter. We have read of David’s “hand” that defeated the Philistines, Abiathar’s “hand” that brought the ephod to David,

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Saul's "hand" that longed to grasp David but so far had failed. The "hands" of the various characters represent the power struggle. The question in the air was, whose "hand" will prevail?²

David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. But Jonathan came to David and **strengthened his hand in God**. How did Jonathan strengthen David's hand in God? By saying to David, **"Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this"** (23:17). Woodhouse writes:

Have you noticed how often in the Bible we hear the words "Do not fear"? They are always spoken in terrifying circumstances, when *fear* is the natural and reasonable thing to do. The words, as we hear them in the Bible, are never an empty attempt at comfort but an expression of a reality that is more powerful than the terrifying circumstances (cf. 1 Samuel 17:32).³

Saul's hand was against David. So David was fearful about what Saul wanted to do to him, that is, to kill him. How did God provide encouragement when needed to David?

By sending David his beloved friend who knew how to encourage a discouraged soul: by pointing him to hear and believe the promise of God. In this case, the promise was, **"You shall be king over Israel."** In a very real sense, Jonathan put David's hand into the hand of God. What David saw was discouraging. But what David *heard* from Jonathan overcame what David *saw*.

Dear friend, God provides encouragement when needed. It is often provided through the ministry of a friend. But, it is always provided through the word of God. The word of God says to us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will

² John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 455.

³ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*, 455–456.

make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town, I dislocated my shoulder while playing rugby. A couple of months later, I dislocated it again and had to have surgery to repair my shoulder. I was terribly discouraged because my athletic career was over. So, for many days—I think it was about two weeks—I constantly read the Bible, seeking some encouragement from the Lord. Each evening I read God’s word for hours, asking God to lift my discouragement. It came, interestingly enough, reading the Book of Job. You remember that because of Satan’s attack Job lost his entire fortune, and then he lost all ten of his children. Then, Satan told God that Job would break if he lost his health. So, God allowed Satan to attack Job’s health, with the provision that he spare Job’s life. So Satan afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head (Job 2:7). Job’s wife then told Job to “curse God and die” (2:9). Job’s response to his wife was, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (2:10). That was a great encouragement to me. Immediately, a great cloud lifted off me. I realized that God is always a good God, and even when he allows dreadful circumstances to come into my life, I don’t know what his reasons are for allowing them to come into my life. But they are always for my good and his glory.

At this time, David and Jonathan renewed their friendship **covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home** (23:18). This was the last time that the two friends saw each other in this life.

When he needed encouragement, God sent Jonathan to David who pointed him to the promise of God.

Let me urge you to look to God’s word for encouragement.

II. God Provides Protection When Needed (23:19-29)

And second, God provides protection when needed.

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Jonathan had barely left David, when things heated up for David.

A. *The Threat (23:19-24a)*

First, let's notice the threat.

Apparently, the people of Ziph knew where David was hiding. So, they **went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon? Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand"** (23:19-20). Undoubtedly, word of Saul's slaughter of the entire town of Nob prompted the **Ziphites** to take preventive action. They did not want Saul to wipe out their city.

When Saul heard from the Ziphites about David's whereabouts, he **said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me. Go, make yet more sure. Know and see the place where his foot is, and who has seen him there, for it is told me that he is very cunning. See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah."** And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul (23:21-24). So, the stage was set for David's capture.

B. *The Escape (23:24b-29)*

And second, let's look at the escape.

It was not long, however, before David's spies informed him that **Saul and his men** were actively looking for him. So David **went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon**, which is about 3 miles southeast of Horesh. **And when Saul**

heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon (23:25). This time Saul got really close to catching David. One can feel the suspense as **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 (23:26a).** Apparently, Saul and his men were quicker than David and his men because **Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them (23:26b).** If we were watching a movie of this scene, the music would be at a crescendo and we would be on the edge of our seats waiting for Saul and his men to capture David and his men.

But, just at that moment, out of nowhere, as it were, **a messenger came to Saul, saying, “Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land” (23:27).** David was not a threat to national security, whereas **the Philistines** were a threat to the safety of Israel. **So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape. And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi (23:28-29),** which is on the west side of the Dead Sea.

Friends, God provides protection when needed. God has an infinite number of ways in which he provides protection when needed. We see this over and over again in Scripture. God protected Moses as a baby in the River Nile when he was hidden from Pharaoh’s soldiers who were slaughtering male children. God even brought Moses into the palace of the Pharaoh to be raised in his very home. God protected the people of Israel when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years after they fled from Egypt. God protected his people as they captured the land of Israel. God protected Daniel when he stopped the mouths of the lions. God protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace so that they did not burn.

In *Leadership Weekly*, Joe McKeever writes:

Late one night, a man in Slim Cornett's church was showing Slim around a county airport in rural Mississippi. "This switch lights up the runway," the man said as he flipped it. "Then, let's say there is a plane in distress up there. I would throw this switch and turn on the search lights."

As the night skies lit up, a small plane materialized out of the darkness and landed. Slim and his friend watched in amazement as Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist, stepped off the plane. The pilot had been flying Franklin back to school in Texas when the electrical system shut down, leaving them stranded in the Mississippi night without lights or radio or any means of guidance. From out of nowhere, the search beam had come on and guided them to the landing strip.

As Franklin's mother, Ruth, tells the story, earlier that evening before they left home, Billy Graham had prayed for the Father to protect and guide his son and the pilot.⁴

God provides protection to you and me when we need it too.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account of God's providence as set forth in 1 Samuel 23:15-29, let us believe that God always takes care of those who belong to him.

God provides encouragement when needed. He sent Jonathan to find David. No doubt David was thrilled to see Jonathan. But the primary means of encouragement that Jonathan gave to David was to strengthen David's hand in God. That is, Jonathan pointed David to the promise of God that David would be king over Israel.

God provides encouragement to us primarily through his word. Let us read God's word. Let us meditate on God's word. Let us memorize God's word. Let us believe God's word. Let us

⁴ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2003/january/14072.html>.

put God's word into practice in our lives. And let us be encouraged by God's word.

God also provides protection when needed. At exactly the moment when it seemed that Saul was about to capture David, a messenger came and told him about a greater problem that needed his attention. God is exceedingly capable of protecting his people in a myriad of ways.

God provides protection to us through providential circumstances. Opportunities open and opportunities close. God is orchestrating those opportunities so that we may keep in step with the Spirit of God.

Of course, sometimes things come into our lives that we don't want. Accidents happen to us. Illnesses afflict us. Eventually, even death takes us. But, we need to recognize in all of these circumstances, God is always in sovereign control.

God's providential deliverance of David is a wonderful anticipation of the resurrection of his greater Son, Jesus. God did not abandon his Son. He allowed him to suffer the agony of hell to provide salvation to a people so numerous that they cannot be counted. But, Jesus' death was not the end of it. No. God raised Jesus back to life again, showing his ultimate providential deliverance for Jesus and all those who belong to him.

Oh dear friends, let us believe that God always takes care of those who belong to him. Amen.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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