

INQUIRING OF THE LORD

1 Samuel 23:1-14

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, January 3, 2010

“Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant” (1 Sam. 23:11).

The chapters in First Samuel that recount the period when David lived as an outlaw are some of the most beloved and valuable portions of the biblical record of his life. These were the years when David responded to great spiritual challenges with a faith that guided him and gave him strength. Psalm 18, purportedly written after “the Lord rescued him from the hand of all his enemies,” sums up David’s frame of mind: “I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge” (Ps. 18:1). Generations of believers have drunk from the well of this and similar expressions of faith that were forged in the crucible of David’s struggle.

David’s spiritual struggle, though unique in some ways, was in many ways similar to our own. David had great promises from God, but the circumstances before him did not make their fulfillment seem likely. In David’s case, God had promised to raise him to the throne of Israel. How much more likely this would have seemed in headier days, such as those after his triumph over Goliath the giant. Back then, trust in God’s promise must have been simple, just as our faith comes easily after early triumphs in the Christian life. Now, during the exile period of David’s life, his faith would follow an up-and-down path: sometimes strong and vibrant, and sometimes desperate and wavering. We may not have a promise of kingship over God’s people, as David did, but we do have promises of blessing, help, and

power from God. “We also have our circumstances. And sometimes the circumstances make the promises seem shadowy and uncertain.”¹

Chapter 23 sees David in a particularly difficult stage of his exile, though an important one to his spiritual growth. Here, David is challenged by the Lord to think not merely of his own survival but of his duty to his neighbors, even as he continues to suffer the grievous plight of betrayal and hatred. God sustains David through this trial with two great resources: the revelation of his Word and the encouragement of a fellow believer. The first half of the chapter focuses on David’s safety in relying on God’s revelation, teaching us the value of living by God’s Word in all the ups and downs of life.

INQUIRING OF THE LORD

In the prior chapter, God directed David through the prophet Gad to return to Judah. At the time, there was no explanation for this order, but the reason becomes known in chapter 23. Keilah, a walled town in the eastern farmlands of Judah, was besieged by the Philistines, who were “robbing the threshing floors” (1 Sam. 23:1). This city was having its economy ruined and its very existence threatened. News of this reached the ears of David: “Now they told David, ‘Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah’” (1 Sam. 23:1). David’s zeal for his country is seen in his willingness to endanger himself on behalf of this city. First, however, David “inquired of the Lord, ‘Shall I go and attack these Philistines?’” (1 Sam. 23:2). Both David’s zeal and his care in consulting God’s Word, probably through the prophet, indicate that his spiritual recovery, begun in the previous chapter, has now advanced. For this reason, the following phase of David’s life will be one of his most spiritually fruitful.

God promises to bless those who turn to him for guidance. David taught in Psalm 19: “the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7-8). In Psalm 119:105, David declared, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” In this case, God’s Word guided David

¹ Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King* (Ross-Shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 85.

to rescue Keilah: “the LORD answered him, ‘Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand’” (1 Sam. 23:4).

When David’s men learned this news, they were understandably shaken: “Behold, we are afraid here in Judah,” they objected; “how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?” (1 Sam. 23:3). It was bad enough being fugitives from Saul; they saw no need to take on the Philistine army as well. As a result of this objection, “David inquired of the LORD again” (1 Sam. 23:4).

During these events, not only was David provided with a prophet to discover God’s Word, but around this time, Abiathar, son of the high priest, arrived in David’s camp, having escaped the slaughter of the priests at Nob. In that slaughter, we were told that Doeg the Edomite “struck own eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod” (1 Sam. 22:18). The ephod, a sort of apron, was part of the priests’ uniform (see Ex. 28:6-8). One of these ephods, the high priest’s, contained the Urim and Thummim, provided by God for the divining of his will (see Ex. 28:30). These lots were designed by God to give yes or no answers to pointed questions or to select a person chosen by lot.

The point we should note here is that God had now provided all the apparatus of kingship to David. Saul, the reigning king, had alienated the prophets and slaughtered the priests. David, the true and divinely anointed king, was now served by a faithful prophet and a true priest. Walter Chantry comments of Saul: “Isolated from God’s servants and the means of grace, evil Saul had the company of evil spirits who manipulated his moods, his words, and his actions. Under demonic influence Saul became a man driven to kill his God-appointed successor.”² In contrast, David, supplied by the means of God’s grace current to that era, was guided and helped in his kingly role by the prophet and the priest. David was thus equipped as a righteous servant and savior for the needy people of Israel. The true king of Israel was to rule by God’s Word, in close company with the prophets and priests. We see why the Davidic kingship came to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who is not only King over God’s people, but is himself our true prophet and perfect high priest as well.

² Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, DATE), 77-78.

REIGNING THROUGH THE WORD

Two of the functions of God's Word are highlighted in these verse: David reigns through God's Word and David is rescued through God's Word.

First, consider how David reigned over his little army by appeal to God's Word. When the people expressed their alarm at the idea of attempting to rescue Keilah, David did not resort to his own reasoning, which could easily fail, or to coercion. Instead, he agreed to inquire of God's Word once more. In this manner, David shows us the basis of effective Christian leadership even today. True spiritual leaders are not those who motivate God's people by their dynamic personality, by appeals to worldly profit, or by the coercive manipulations of guilt or abuse. Rather, true Christian leadership is based on the setting forth of God's Word.

Notice how David handled the difficult matter of persuading his men and alleviating their understandable fears. Abiathar had not yet arrived with the ephod, so David must have inquired of the Lord through the prophet: "And the LORD answered him, 'Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand'" (1 Sam. 23:4). In short, David gained from God a clear direction for their action and a promise of divine help and success. This is what Christian leaders should provide today, both God's instructions and God's promises for the blessings that obedience will bring. A. W. Pink comments: "David did not storm at his men, and denounce them as cowards... Nor did he argue and attempt to reason with them. Disdaining his own wisdom, feeling his utter dependency upon God, and more especially for their benefit – to set before them a godly example – he turned once more unto Jehovah."³

Christian leaders today do not follow David's kingly example by appealing to the latest management practices or marketing ploys, nor by setting themselves forth as transcendent spiritual celebrities, but by bringing God's Word to the people. The kingly reign of Christ is served when, like David, believers seek direction from God's revelation, which we have in the Holy Scriptures.

³ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, DATE), 1:96.

Consider the leadership of a Christian father in the home. How is he to establish Christ's kingly reign? The answer is by implementing biblical standards and expectations for relationships within the family. The husband is sacrificially to love and lead his wife and the wife is to help and submit to her husband (see Eph. 5:22-33). The children are to obey their parents, and parents are to treat them with fairness and consideration (Eph. 6:1-2). The basis for family relations is thus given in Holy Scripture.

Consider as well a pastor and other leaders in the church. It is popular today for churches to be organized on business principles, with boards of directors governing behind the scenes and with the congregants looked upon as customers. But Christ reigns in his church through biblical church governance – with pastors, elders, and deacons leading committed church members in accordance with the pastoral epistles and other New Testament instructions. Christ reigns in his church through faithful biblical teaching, centered on the cross (1 Cor. 2:2) and holding forth “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Christ reigns in his church when leaders bring the members to God in “acceptable worship” that is regulated by God’s Word, “with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28).

Like David, who both sought and taught God’s Word, Christian leaders today – fathers and mothers in the home, pastors and elders in the church – must communicate the biblical basis for their decisions and directives. This is why at the heart of Christian leadership is a knowledge of the Bible and an ability to convey it to followers.

David’s obedience to God’s Word was rewarded in a number of ways. The first was the unity of effort shown by his followers, who were evidently persuaded of God’s will in this matter. Second, God blessed David’s obedience with the fulfillment of his promise to “give the Philistines into [his] hand” (1 Sam. 23:4). As a result, “David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow” (1 Sam. 23:5). Here was the unexpected blessing of material provision for David’s band, as the Philistine herds fell into their hands. Moreover, “David saved the inhabitants of Keilah.” Finally, it seems that it was in the aftermath of this success that Abiathar arrived with the high priest’s ephod, with the Urim and Thummim for even more precise

revelation from God. By inquiring of God's Word, David brought unity and confidence to his followers and was attended with God's promised blessing.

RESCUED BY THE WORD

This did not mean that David was therefore free from trouble, any more than our obedience will be carefree. For there was still Saul to consider: "Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, 'God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.' And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men" (1 Sam. 23:7-8).

It was right at the time when David learned this news about Saul that Abiathar arrived with the Urim and Thummim. David directly appealed to this divinely appointed means of revelation: "David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, 'Bring the ephod here'" (1 Sam. 23:9). We can sense David's weariness and the strain from Saul's unending malice as he calls upon the Lord with such fervor, repeatedly noting God's covenant relationship to his people:

Then said David, "O LORD, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down." Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will surrender you." Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition (1 Sam. 23:10-13).

Like David, when we make a habit of carefully consulting the Lord, we are not only enabled to reign through God's Word but we are rescued from all manner of dangers. Consider the besetting sins of our time, such as wanton sexual indulgence and the celebration of adultery. Despite temptation and confusing moral values, Christians who diligently consult God's Word will be delivered from great sin. The Bible teaches, "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18), and "let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually

immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4). By following this counsel, believers are spared from many woes. Especially young people today, given the dissolute nature of worldly youth culture, may be tempted simply to adopt a sensual manner of dress or conduct, despite the lifestyle to which such an attitude often leads. God’s Word rescues us from this danger as Paul reminds us of our high calling to purity and holiness: “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (Eph. 5:3).

We could make similar observations about other common sin areas. American society has suffered from a frenzy of materialism and greed, manifested in mad folly in the real estate and financial markets. Christians who have consulted God’s Word are protected in the crashing of markets and the plummeting of real estate values, having been guarded by the Bible’s teaching. Paul wrote: “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9). The wisdom of God’s Word protects believers from the disaster of greed, knowing that “there is great gain in godliness with contentment” (1 Tim. 6:6). So it is that both in guiding us aright and in rescuing us from the folly and sin, believers who inquire diligently of God’s Word experience the truth of the well-known proverb: “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 make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5-6).

DISCERNING GOD’S WILL TODAY

As we apply David’s example to our lives today, many will object that Christians no longer possess the prophetic resources that enabled David to gain God’s answers to specific questions about his life. This objection is based on an accurate observation, for David occupied a unique role in the history of God’s redeeming work and thus received special resources. How, then, do Christians today – lacking an Urim or Thummim – gain God’s guidance for the important decisions of our lives?

In a brief but valuable book on this topic, *Discovering God’s Will*, Sinclair Ferguson guides us in the proper use of the Scriptures in

discerning God's will for our important decisions.⁴ Ferguson offers a number of steps that will help us in biblical decision-making today.

First, when faced with a choice, we should seek to understand what the Bible prohibits or commands. Christians are saved so as no longer to live in sin but to obey God's Word. Therefore, "no action which is contrary to the plain word of God can ever be legitimate for the Christian."⁵

This is one reason why it is so important for Christians to know the Ten Commandments. Any course of action that involves lying, hating another person, or seizing possessions that belong to someone else are in violation of God's law. This seems obvious, but Christians can avoid many serious mistakes if they simply place the grid of the Ten Commandments over their decision-making. The same is true when it comes to clear duties that the Bible gives. It is always God's will for us to obey his commands and never to violate his law.

Second, having ascertained which courses of action are forbidden, Christians should then consider which options are wise and beneficial according to Bible principles. Is the action profitable and in accord with biblical priorities? If not, then even if it is not forbidden it should still be avoided. Often this will involve occupational choices or job locations. Is this a job that will provide for my family while enabling me to be faithful as a husband, father, and Christian? Do I know of a good church where I am thinking of moving? Does this prospective husband or wife exhibit strong faith and biblical character? Is this a purchase for myself that is reasonable? Will this choice likely strengthen my relationship with Jesus Christ or weaken my faith? Ferguson writes: "It is possible to make choices which, eventually, will tend to squeeze out our spiritual energies; to commit ourselves to things which, however legitimate in general terms, will eventually become the dominating and driving force in our lives."⁶

Third, Christians should ask what kind of effect a given choice or decision is likely to have on others. How will this action affect family members, co-workers, friends and fellow church members? It

⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

is true that the Bible teaches Christian liberty in matters of biblical permission. Yet our liberty must always be guided by responsibility and love. Paul writes that we should never allow our choices to “destroy the work of God” or “make another stumble” (Rom. 14:20). While we tend to be motivated by concerns for our personal comfort and security, God challenges us to sacrifice for the spiritual well-being of others.

Fourth, Christians should compare their proposed action with a biblical example or illustration. Paul wrote the Corinthians, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:11). How did faithful men and women in Scripture handle this same situation? Hebrew 13:7 says that we should likewise consider the example of faithful Christian leaders we have known: “Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). Most important is the example of Jesus Christ, properly understood from the Scriptures. Much that Jesus did could only have been done by him and in many cases should only be done by him. Jesus alone is Lord, and we are not to assume his prerogatives. But when it comes to his compassion for the weak and broken, his zeal for God and his ways, and Jesus’ courage before worldly opposition, he is indeed our great model. Notice the emphasis that Peter gave in setting forth the example of Christ: speaking of the cross, the apostle wrote, “to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

All of these principles of biblical decision-making assume two vital preconditions. The first is that we know our Bibles! We will never know God’s will until we have followed Paul’s command to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom. 12:2). Ferguson writes, “The chief need we have, therefore, is that of increased familiarity with and sensitivity to the wisdom of his word.”⁷ Accompanying a mind increasingly shaped by Scripture is a heart warmed by frequently meeting with the Lord in prayer. Notice that a priority on Scripture and prayer matches the two resources given to David: the prophetic

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

word and the priestly intercession. The Puritan John Newton thus wrote to a Christian friend:

How then may the Lord's guidance be expected?... In general, he guides and directs his people, by affording them, in answer to prayer, the light of his Holy Spirit, which enables them to understand and to love the Scriptures. The word of God... is to furnish us with just principles, right apprehensions to regulate our judgements and affections, and thereby influence and direct our conduct.⁸

Some might consider that this kind of biblical analysis rules out what is often referred to as “God’s leading” in our lives. It is true that God may lay burdens or passions on our heart and in this way the Holy Spirit seeks to guide us, along with providential opportunities that God sets before us. Yet the Spirit’s leading and God’s providence never run counter to God’s Word. Nothing forbidden by God is ever prompted by the Spirit, nor does God lead us in ways that are contrary to biblical principles and motives.

Sometimes, Christians desire information that God simply has not promised to provide. Should a young man join the Army or the Marine Corps? There may be circumstances that lead in one way or the other, but far more important than choosing between the two is deciding to honor Christ in either service. Should a Christian man pursue marriage with Susy or Tammy? Should a Christian woman choose Bill or Bob? Assuming that both potential sources are equally committed to Christ and show godly character, they may feel free to marry the one to which they are more naturally attracted. What really matters is that the man or woman obey God’s commands for how a husband and wife should love one another. The revelation we really need from God is precisely what God has already given us in his Word: his commands and instructions for glorifying him and living in a godly, loving, and wise manner.

SIN AND SALVATION REVEALED

Not only does the Bible help us to make godly decisions, but, even more importantly, God’s Word informs us of the great and vital truths of life. Some of the Bible’s great truths are unfolded in

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

David's experience in this passage.

First, the Bible tells us that we will find no hope of salvation in the ways of men. Consider the people of Keilah. When Saul's forces drew near, David inquired of the Lord: "Then David said, 'Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?' And the LORD said, 'They will surrender you'" (1 Sam. 23:12). David had sacrificially endangered himself and his men in order to save the city, but as soon as a new danger came the Keilites were all too willing to save themselves by betraying David to Saul. This is the way of the whole world, as the Bible teaches. "None is righteous, no, not one," writes the apostle Paul. "No one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10, 12). This being true, we cannot trust our salvation into the hands of any men. This is true even of ourselves. We so seldom live up to our highest ideals and frequently let down ourselves and others in our weakness and sin. Even when we desire to save one another, we often lack the power, as Keilah doubtless lacked the power to shield David from Saul. This is why David sang, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation" (Ps. 146:3).

Second, the Bible reveals that we are pursued by a mighty and dreadful enemy who seeks to destroy our souls. David had done no evil to Saul, yet Saul was bent on destroying him utterly. So also are we threatened by our evil adversary, the devil. Peter warns us, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). Our enemy's hatred is not easily avoided, since he wields the power of sin, and sin is backed up with the threat of God's own law and its curse of death on our sin. This is why the writer of Hebrews says that the devil subjects all mankind "through fear of death... to lifelong slavery" (Heb. 2:15). Paul writes, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). This our great and terrible problem, that the mad enemy who hates us has gained power over us through sin and draws near to destroy us with the sword of God's holy justice. We see this terror reflected throughout David's psalms as he flees from wicked king Saul. David said, "Strangers have risen up against me; ruthless men seek my life" (Ps. 54:3). Behind Saul stood the greater enemy of

Satan and sin, seeking David's eternal condemnation as well as our own.

Third, the Bible reveals that we may find a refuge and safe stronghold in the grace and power of God, whose Word speaks of a Savior who delivers us from Satan and from sin. Though the people of Keilah betrayed him and though the clutches of evil king Saul still sought him, the Lord saved and preserved David's life: "David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand" (1 Sam. 23:14). David therefore sang with joy, "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life" (Ps. 54:4).

God achieved our salvation by sending his own Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, to bear the punishment of our sins, free us from the wrath of God's holy justice, and in this way to overthrow the kingdom of our great enemy the devil. David therefore praised God even as we trust the Lord for our own salvation: "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God" (Ps. 146:5).