

A CORNER OF THE ROBE

1 Samuel 24:1-22

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“And Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God” (1 Sam. 23:16).

In the first chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul points out that people who deny God do not do so because of a lack of evidence. For not only were all men and women created so as to know God, but the evidence for God bombards us in the created realm. Paul says, “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). Unbelievers therefore reject a God whom they know, out of moral rebellion to him. Paul says, “by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth... For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:18, 21). The result is that “they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21), so that they embrace and are given over by God to every kind of perverse way of thinking and acting.

In Romans, Paul employed a number of Old Testament examples to prove his teaching, including Abraham, Moses, and David. Had the apostle wanted to enlarge on the doctrine of unbelief, he could have hardly have done better than the example of Israel’s king Saul. Saul chose the path of his own will rather than the will of God. He is a picture of everyone today who knows the truth of God but suppresses that truth. Saul, no doubt, thought that as Israel’s king he could stave off the consequences of rebellion against God, just as modern man persuades himself he can ignore God and rewrite millennia-old rules of morality and human society, trusting in his technology, wealth, and leisure to live successfully in opposition to God’s Word. Saul

learned, however, that the day of reckoning can come suddenly, even at what seems to be a moment of triumph. One of Paul's points about unbelief is that there are always consequences in the end, and a price of twisted moral priorities to be paid along the way. Saul was a living illustration of this teaching.

SAUL'S DAY OF THE LORD

Saul had bitter experience with the Lord's chastisement, especially during his long pursuit of David. The previous chapter saw the king bearing down on his fugitive son-in-law, only to have the Philistine army unexpectedly launch an invasion that called Saul away. We are not told how long it took Saul to subdue the Philistines, only that when he returned from the campaign he immediately turned his efforts back to chasing David. This shows that not all human success is a sign of God's favor. Moreover, Saul failed to reflect on these experiences, not realizing that the God who gave him victory over Israel's enemies is the same God who preserved David from Saul's attacks. Just as Pharaoh persisted in opposition to God after ten successive plagues upon Egypt, Saul persisted against God's opposition to his murderous efforts against David.

So it is with unbelievers in general. Sinful and selfish plans may be checked by setbacks, sickness, or other restraints, each of which provides an opportunity to reflect upon the state of their soul. Like Saul, as soon as God providentially restores him, the unbeliever plows ahead digging his eternal grave with a renewed commitment to sin and self. So it was that Saul returned from battle with the Philistines, picking three thousand elite troops and setting off to finish David once for all: "Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the Wildgoats' Rocks" (1 Sam. 24:2).

Those who trust and serve the Lord have the blessing of knowing that God's saving help is sure to appear in time. The exact opposite is true of those who turn their backs on God: they can be certain that the day of God's judgment will inevitably arrive, often in a sudden and surprising way. Jesus spoke this way of the rich fool who had sought security in his earthly riches: "Fool! This night your soul is required

of you” (Lk. 12:20). For Saul, the day of the Lord’s chastisement came equally unexpectedly, and in a way that stripped bare his royal pretense. “He came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave, and Saul went into relieve himself” (1 Sam. 24:3). Engedi is a region of shale cliffs, with numerous caverns and a perpetual spring of fresh water, and was a favorite place of refreshment for shepherds with their flocks. Into one of these extensive caverns, David and some of his men had fled, when in walked Saul alone. The Hebrew text says that Saul then “uncovered his feet,” and most scholars are agreed that this refers to Saul disrobing himself so as to exercise his bodily functions in privacy.

There David and his men were huddled, like little mice in the darkness of their cave, with Saul’s “special forces” units down below. How secure Saul must have felt in his strength! Yet even a Saul must answer the call of nature and, according to the Israelite law, he was forbidden to relieve himself within the confines of the camp. Spying a harmless-looking cave, Saul ambled in to do his business.

The Bible says that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Ja. 4:6), but we forget how ruthless the Lord can be in bringing low his proud opponents. What a sight for David and his men when into their hideout strode the unsuspecting king, exposing himself not only to their eyes but to their hungry blades. The men could hardly contain their delight, saying to David: “Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, ‘Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you’” (1 Sam. 24:4). The Bible does not record any such prophecy and, given what would transpire here, it is likely that the men simply engaged in some creative theology. It did not take a seminary professor, they insisted, to interpret what God was doing! Dale Ralph Davis imagines them quietly breaking out in a chorus, singing: “This is the day, this is the day that the Lord hath made...”¹

To be sure, it was *a* day of the Lord for Saul, though whether or not it was *the* day of his reckoning was not yet certain. Proverbs 13:15 says, “The way of the transgressor is hard” (KJV). Little did Saul imagine how humiliating his disgrace would be. However, just as

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 199.

Paul insists that God gives over the wicked to lusts and impurity (Rom. 1:24), God also gives them over to destruction at the hour of his own choosing. So long as Saul remained a mere human being, he was at the mercy of the God he had rejected, and having spurned God's mercy he could fall at any moment when the Lord chose to deliver him into the hands of his foes. Such is the lamentable plight for all who suppress the knowledge of God and spurn his merciful offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

DAVID'S STRICKEN HEART

Having exposed Saul to humiliation and assault, the text turns its attention to David's side of the cave. Spurred on by the excited urging of his men, David began quietly sneaking up behind his unsuspecting enemy. Finally, he drew near, his band of followers collectively holding their breath. But David hesitated. "*Don't hesitate, David!*" his men must have silently gasped. "*Finish him off!*" But David did hesitate, before finally reaching forward to act. But it was not Saul himself for which he reached, it was only his royal robe lying on the ground."² This dramatic scene unfolds in the brief understatement of verse 4: "Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe."

We can imagine the outraged disappointment of David's followers, as they watched David quietly return, with Saul's blood unshed. The opportunity would be lost! David returned to wage a battle of wills with his men, who could only have been frustrated by his apparent loss of nerve. But it was not a lack of nerve that stayed David's hand; indeed as he returned to his hiding place David was grief-stricken for even the small gesture of vindictiveness he had gone through with. He said to the men: "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD 's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6).

Why was David's conscience stricken? Verse 5 says: "afterward David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul's robe." David knew that the royal robe was a symbol of Saul's

² Richard D. Phillips, *The Heart of an Executive: Leadership Lessons from the Life of King David* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 127.

authority as Israel's king. We saw this in 1 Samuel 15:28, when Samuel took the tearing of Saul's robe as a symbol that the kingdom would be torn from him and given "to one who is better than you." Robert Bergen writes: "David's confiscation of a portion of the royal robe signified the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David."³

Why was David stricken over this merciful way of sparing Saul's life? Far from congratulating himself over sparing the life of his relentless persecutor, David assailed himself with the fact that in striking out at Saul's robe, he was in effect rebelling against God. David knew that Saul did not remain on the throne by accident, but by God's sovereign will. However little respect David by now had for Saul, he had a deep reverence for the office Saul held, seeing it as a manifestation of God's reign. Looking on the situation from the Godward direction, David remembered that Saul was still "the LORD'S anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6), so that to strike against the king was to strike out at God. Assured of this conviction, David not only explained himself to the men but he strove with them so as to prevent them from harming Saul. The New International Version most accurately renders verse 7: "With these words David rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul."

Reflecting on this dramatic episode, we first ask how David reasoned through this providence. He would have agreed with the men that it was God who placed Saul at their mercy. However, the mere fact that God has provided an opportunity does not guarantee that he intends us to exercise it. Often, as is the case here, God tests his servants to reveal the state of their hearts. When Jonah arrived in Joppa to find a ship bound for Tarshish already in port, God was not facilitating the prophet's rebellion but rather testing his faithfulness. God likewise tests us in the presence of opportunity to sin in order to make known to us what is the true state of our hearts and to cause us to draw near to him for strength and protection. Gordon Keddie writes: "an 'open door' is not, in itself, proof of God's will. Circumstances, in God's providence are not a substitute for the principle he has revealed in his Word, the Bible."⁴

³ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 239.
⁴ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 224.

Consider what a test this was for David! A. W. Pink comments:

One stroke of his sword, and he steps into a throne. Farewell to poverty! Farewell the life of a hunted goat. Reproaches, sneers, defeat, would cease; adulations, triumphs, riches would be his. But his at the sacrifice of faith; at the sacrifice of a humbled will, ever waiting on God's time; at the sacrifice of a thousand precious experiences of God's care, God's provision, God's guidance, God's tenderness. No, even a throne at that price is too dear. Faith will wait.⁵

It would not have been hard to justify slaying Saul. The king was guilty and deserved to die, for the murder of the priests at Nob if not for all his many other crimes. Moreover, removing Saul might possibly lead to a national restoration to the Lord. How many Christians today would give in to such arguments, justifying sinful or unbiblical means with the godly ends that they are pursuing, reasoning that results are all that really matters. David, however, realized that he stood at a critical turning point in his life. God had promised him the throne. Would he take it in merciless blood, slaying with his own hand the anointed of the Lord and with that same bloody hand placing the crown of God's people on his head? Whether David would reign was never in doubt, God having promised it. But how David would reign and what kind of kingdom his leadership would produce was at stake in the darkness of the cave at Engedi. He realized that it was vitally important for his relationship to God and for his future as God's servant that he restrain himself from what might have felt good but which consisted of unbelief and sin.

David shows, in contrast to Saul, the power of God's Word to govern and restrain the passions from violence and sin. Saul is a man who knows but suppresses the truth of God. His reign is therefore one of violence and unrestrained tyranny. So powerful is his inner turmoil that he literally walks around carrying a spear, with which he may impulsively strike at any time. David, in contrast, not only knows God, but makes God's Word "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). The result is a self-control that is practically impossible to any other kind of man. David is beset with overwhelming pressures to act violently, urged by men who had

⁵ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 1:114.

sacrificed everything for him, and with frustration pent up over years of injustice and cruel pursuit by this man who had seemingly ruined his life. Moreover, David's act would take place in the dark, giving him full opportunity to shape the record of it as he saw fit.

How many noble hearts have failed under trials less potent than David's! Scotland's Robert the Bruce faced a similar trial when he met with his rival for the throne, the traitorous John Comyn, in the Greyfriars' chapel. So bitter was the Bruce's hatred and indignation that he could not restrain his hand from plunging a knife into the Comyn's breast. Bruce would spend the rest of his life seeking to undo this bloody foundation to his reign as King of Scotland.

So what force restrained David's hand under even greater pressure to slay? The answer is the weight of God's Word upon his conscience, giving David self-control so that he did not fall victim to sinful passion. David reflected that Saul was "the anointed of the LORD." No doubt, he also dwelt on the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13), and the injunction of Exodus 22:28, forbidding Israelites to curse their ruler. William Blaikie sums up David's motivation in words that express our only hope to avoid by led to ruin by our sinful passions: "He acted in utter contempt of what was personal and selfish, and in deepest reverence for what was holy and Divine."⁶ To govern the will by a reverence for God is sure proof of a heart trained by frequent consultation of God's Word.

OUTSIDE THE CAVE

David escaped a sin that would have stained his entire future, despite the approval of his supporters. A David who slew Saul would have been like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's classic play, forever seeking to expunge the damning stain of blood. What kind of kingdom could David have ruled over if he had gained the throne by cold-bloodedly slaying his predecessor? Christians can likewise avoid the calamities that are so commonplace among the ungodly – financial frauds, sexual infidelities, and relationship-

⁶ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 368.

severing fits of anger – by submitting our conduct to the rule of Scripture.

On the positive side, we also see how David was enabled to provide spiritual leadership even in the face of Saul’s wicked authority. The contrast between David and Saul, so clear inside the cave – one of them cursed and the other blessed with spiritual power – is equally clear outside the cave. Starting with David, we see how faithful submission to God and his Word empowers us to exert spiritual blessing in any situation.

First, God’s power enabled David to be a peacemaker, in the face of the most wicked hostility. “Afterward David also arose and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, ‘My lord the king!’ And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage” (1 Sam. 24:8). How could David bow to a despot like Saul, who had done everything to ruin him? The answer is that David had committed himself into the hands of God, leaving his own care to God’s sovereign will. Moreover, instructed by the Scriptures, he left vengeance to the Lord. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves,” wrote Paul, “but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19). Imagine the astonished look on Saul’s face, first to realize his narrow escape and then to see his sworn enemy bowing in obeisance. Despite his grievances against the king, David’s faith empowered him to approach Saul not as an outlaw or enemy but as the faithful subject he had desired to be. “Rather than falling upon Saul in a murderous attack, David fell upon the ground ‘and prostrated himself with his face to the ground,’⁷ approaching the king peaceably and with proper respect.

David then spoke to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of men who say, ‘Behold, David seeks your harm?’” (1 Sam. 24:9). This was a generous way of interpreting Saul’s policy against David. A. W. Pink observes, “Most graciously did David throw the blame upon Saul’s courtiers, rather than upon the king himself.”⁸ It is possible that David was aware of some truth in this claim, since Saul

⁷ Bergen, *1 Samuel*, 240.

⁸ Pink, *A Life of David*, 1:120.

surrounded himself with many who would consider David a rival. David's speech was designed, however, to subdue rather than inflame Saul's hostility. How many disputes that have escalated to sever friendships and family bonds might have been dissolved by this generous spirit of reconciliation. That even Saul responded favorably to David's peaceful entreaty proves the teaching of Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath."

Second, men and women who live in subjection to God's Word are able to show their good will toward all others. We live in a society increasingly torn into tribes and factions, with each isolated by the hostility of others. Living in accordance with God's Word, Christians should be like David, who demonstrated to Saul that his motives and intentions were friendly. David said:

Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it (1 Sam. 24:10-11).

There can be no doubt that Saul, hearing David's words, reflexively gazed down to the hem of his robe. Seeing the torn corner, the reality would strike home with telling force. David's knife had come within easy striking distance of Saul's flesh; the man of faith had declined to do what Saul had spent years trying to do to him. David was proved to be a man of godly principles, and thus virtually the only kind of person who can be trusted not to do harm but only good. So it should be with all believers: our demonstrated record of faithfulness, self-control, and love should commend us as those few who can be trusted when integrity matters most.

This emphasis formed an important part of the early church's defense of Christianity against pagan slander. In his *First Apology*, Tertullian could plainly assert that the Christians were Caesar's most loyal, peaceable, and trustworthy citizens, so that only mad self-destructive impulses could seek their demise. He wrote to the emperor: "In the performance of our good deeds we do not make any exception of persons; for we do them for our own sakes, and seek to obtain the

meed of praise or reward, not from man, but from God... We are the same towards the emperors as towards our neighbors. For we are alike forbidden to wish, or do, or speak, or think, evil of anyone.”⁹ Can Christians make such a claim today? If we did, the sordid record of many pastors and other public Christians, falling into the very sins so common to the pagan society, would mock the Christian claim to sincere integrity and good will. Holding the corner of Saul’s robe, David had tangible proof that testified to his good will and fidelity. Each Christian should ask what proof of good will we could display before our neighbors, co-workers, and even our enemies.

Third, David shows how believers may respectfully deliver God’s rebuke to sin. He declared to Saul: “May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes wickedness.’ But my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea!” (1 Sam. 24:12-14). David was wise to offer this reproof after he had first proved his peace and good will. Having previously spoken with humility to soften Saul’s heart, he was able to secure Saul’s consideration of godly reproof.

Finally, David concluded his remarkable embassy by appealing to the Lord for his safety and success: “May the LORD therefore be judge and give sentence between me and you, and see to it and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand” (1 Sam. 24:15). This appeal to God gave force to David’s prior assurance, “I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam. 24:10). In this way, David advanced his appeal for Saul to rethink his violent pursuit. For those who appeal to God’s justice may be counted on to obey God’s Word in living peaceably with all men (see Rom. 12:18).

SAUL’S TEARFUL SELF-REFUTATION

The success of David’s godly appeal is seen not in any lasting change on Saul’s part, but in the further contrast between their consciences. His spirit bound in submission to God’s Word, David spoke peacefully in a way that was matched the evidence of his

⁹ Tertullian, *First Apology*, 36.

life. Saul, on the other hand, could only express his conscience in a manner that condemned the chief priorities of his own life. How often this is the case for the testimony of unbelief.

Three features of Saul's reply stand out, beginning with the tearful blessing he utters for David. "As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, 'Is this your voice, my son David?' And Saul lifted up his voice and wept" (1 Sam. 24:16). Whatever little capacity for love was left in Saul's blackened heart, David's humble entreaty succeeded in drawing it out. But David could not bring about true repentance in Saul, since only the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit can truly change the heart. The king showed his true colors, admitting, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil" (1 Sam. 24:17). This is typical of unbelieving piety, which always seeks to reserve some self-justification: not that Saul is wholly unrighteous, but that David is more righteous than Saul. Contrast Saul's plea to the humble repentance of the tax collector in Jesus' parable, whose true repentance implored, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). Those who truly repent have nothing to say for their own righteousness, but are filled with conviction over their many sins. Still, Saul at least admitted David's righteous conduct in sparing his life and the proof of his good will: "For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day" (1 Sam. 24:19). With these words, Saul implicitly called down God's judgment on his unrepentant persecution of innocent David.

Second, Saul made a stunning revelation that publicly announced the futility of his ungodly life: "And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand" (1 Sam. 24:20). In similar fashion, unbelievers today frequently complain about the vanity of pursuing fame and fortune, writing their own condemnation on the course of life they seem unable to cease.

Third, Saul pitifully pled with David to spare his household in the inevitable event of David's ascent to the throne. "Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house" (1

Sam. 24:21). The same David who had cut off the corner of his robe had power to cut off Saul's entire line and name, and Saul sought his mercy, without any word of mercy to David in return.

Note that David did not even bother to ask Saul's pledge in sparing his life. He had committed himself to the Lord and, while forgiving Saul on God's behalf, David knew better than trust a word that fell from Saul's unregenerate lips. In relying on David's mercy, Saul bore eloquent testimony of the surpassing blessing that comes to those who trust the very God whom Saul had rejected. Saul could not face the reality of the situation before him without condemning his unbelief, bearing testimony in his appeal to David that God can and does create men and women after his own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), believers who can be trusted to live on a plane higher than that to which Saul would even bother to aspire.

THE CROWN AND THE CROSS

In cave of Engedi, we observe David at one of the highest spiritual pinnacles of his entire life. What a difference it made to his future that he honored the Lord during this time of trial! How important it is for us that we pass the tests of faith that God sets before us, for in many cases our future usefulness to the Lord may be on the line.

Thinking of David in his merciful restraint towards king Saul, we are reminded of the greater and more significant example of his descendant, Jesus Christ. Indeed, the biblical account of David is meant to portray the character and achievement of Jesus in saving us from our sins. How vital it was for our salvation that Jesus did not reach out to seize his throne in a manner contrary to God's plan. The devil sought this as perhaps the best chance to turn the Messiah from his saving course. Satan laid before Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'" (Mt. 4:8-9). Why should Jesus take his kingdom at the feet of Satan? Because Satan offered the crown without the cross. This is ever Satan's false appeal to God's people. Satan promised Jesus nothing less than what God had ordained. What difference would the means employed make, he would have argued! The difference lay in our salvation, and Jesus knew that the very nature of his kingdom lay in the balance: only by

doing God's work in God's way would Jesus truly receive God's reward for himself and his people.

Are you tempted to seek the crown of salvation without the cross of a life governed by obedience to God's Word? Are you tempted to justify sinful or worldly means because the outward results will come more easily? May God grant us the power, along with David, looking at the crucified and resurrected Jesus, never to lay our hands on the blessings God has promised in a manner contrary to the will of God in his Word. Let us, instead, commit to receive whatever blessings God has for us from God's own hand or not at all. In any other way the blessings are lost, the harvest is polluted, and the cup of salvation is spoiled with the taint of sin and worldly compromise. "Wait for the LORD and keep his way," David counsels us, "and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off" (Ps. 37:34).