

THE RIGHTEOUS KING

1 Samuel 26:1-25

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“The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for the LORD gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the LORD’S anointed” (1 Sam. 26:23).

On the 11th of May, 1685, eighteen year-old Margaret Wilson was condemned for refusing to swear the Oath of Abjuration, that notorious statement of allegiance to King James VII not only as sovereign ruler over Scotland but also as sovereign over the church of Jesus Christ. Margaret was most willing to acknowledge the king as her secular sovereign. But as a Christian, she could not swear the rule over her soul to anyone but Christ. Jesus, she insisted, was sole sovereign over his kingdom and into his hands alone she committed her eternal destiny.

For this “crime,” Margaret was tied to a stake in the Solway River awaiting the intrushing tide. Tied further into the water was her older companion, Margaret Lachlison, so that the younger Margaret could witness her drowning and reconsider her obstinate faith. Young Margaret was undaunted by the spectacle, however, declaring that Christ was himself suffering in her friend. Then, as the waters swirled towards her own post, Margaret recited aloud the eighth chapter of Romans, concluding with Paul’s great promise that not even death can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

On came the waters, and after she had suffered for a while in drowning, Margaret’s persecutors removed her from her post. Splaying her onto the beach where she gasped for air, they asked if she would pray for King James. She would pray for his salvation, she assured them, since “I wish the salvation of all men.” But would she

swear the oath of spiritual allegiance to Scotland's king? "I will not," she said. At this, a soldier pushed her weakened body back into the waters and held her underneath until she died.¹

We live now in a time in which professed Christians in the West are scarcely bold enough to withstand even the fads and fashions of a culture in rebellion to Christ's rule. Margaret Wilson would surely reprove us, as Jesus taught, not to "fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," rather fearing "him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28). Moreover, her more advanced experience with worldly powers would direct us to ponder the words the psalms record: "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).

SAUL'S ADVANCED DEPRAVITY

If believers need instruction in not trusting worldly powers, Israel's king Saul provides a convincing proof. 1 Samuel chapter 26 presents Saul's depravity once more, on this second occasion when David graciously spared the enemy who was at his mercy. Due to the similarity between chapters 24 and 26, in both of which David forebears to slay king Saul, critical scholars are united in denying the historical accuracy of the accounts, assuring us that two such similar events cannot be accepted as possible. Yet, just as with other so-called discrepancies in the Bible, only an independent knowledge of the events in question could prove error in the Scriptures. Lacking these, and believing the Bible's testimony to be the inspired Word of God, we have good reasons to accept the events of 1 Samuel 26 as not only genuine but also instructive for our faith.

Admittedly, not much had changed in Saul since his last appearance. In this, he well represents the wicked corruption that afflicts all earthly powers apart from the saving grace of God. Notice, for instance, how ready Saul was to commit evil. The chapter begins with David taking refuge once more in the wilderness of Ziph. Critical scholars doubt that David would return to this place of prior betrayal (see 1 Sam. 23:19-20), but there cannot have been too many

¹ Cited from Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 416-420.

suitable hideouts for David and his band of six hundred. History did, however, repeat itself: “the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, ‘Is not David hiding himself on the hill of Hachilah, which is on the east of Jeshimon?’” (1 Sam. 26:1).

Given Saul’s words at the end of his prior meeting with David, outside the cave of En Gedi where his life had been spared, we might expect the king to ignore this intelligence. Saul had, after all, vindicated David of treason (1 Sam. 24:20). We might, therefore, expect Saul to send the Ziphites away with an admonition to leave David alone. Yet the exact opposite happened. “Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand chosen men of Israel to seek David in the wilderness of Ziph” (1 Sam. 26:2).

What explains this about-face? The answer is that man in sin is ever ready to commit evil. This reality is all the more true of men and women who exercise great power, and whose graceless hearts bear the burdens of privilege and authority. Consider the never-ceasing news of political leaders today, who one after another fall prey to sexual sins, dishonesty, fraud, and cover-ups, despite the proven likelihood of their being caught. Why do they leap at opportunities to sin? Because, having enflamed themselves with the hot wine of power and pride, their depraved natures draw them into self-destroying sin.

Had Saul not figured out that God was not going to permit him to take David’s life, as he admitted after their last meeting? Yet how irrational sin is in the mighty! How could Scotland’s king think that publicly drowning a teenage girl would enhance his spiritual authority? How can Communist despots in China today fail to notice that their persecution of house churches only causes them to grow? The problem is the corruption of man’s depraved nature: it is ever ready to commit sin and forget God’s punishment for those who do evil. This is a problem not confined to the high and mighty. Do you, having seized the sovereign reins of your own life and choices not realize the peril of sinful desires? It is sin, not faith, that is blind, and ever ready to follow one disaster with a renewed zeal for another.

Being aware of this tendency, David had not entrusted himself to Saul after the king’s superficial penitence at En Gedi. David reminds us of Jesus’ response to the superficial praised received in the early months

of his ministry: “Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people . . . , for he himself knew what was in man” (Jn. 2:24-25). Christians who gain in wisdom regarding the world, learning the truth about the its depravity from God’s Word, will understand what Margaret Wilson came to know early in life, entrusting her soul only to Jesus even at the cost of an early exit from the realm of wicked and worldly kings in this life.

DAVID’S GROWTH IN GRACE

I noted that there is no compelling reason to see chapter 26 as merely another version of the events in chapter 24. Anyone who has been in an abusive relationship like David’s with Saul can tell you that the same scenes tend to be replayed over and over, contrary to liberal claims that these chapters are too similar to be both true. Most importantly, however, by reflecting on the material found in chapters 24-26 we discern an important advancement in David’s spiritual understanding and maturity. Whereas as Saul returns unchanged by his experience, David’s experience in God’s tutelage has brought a notable growth in grace. We see this in the unfolding of events at Saul’s military camp.

Learning of Saul’s advance from his scouts, David went forward to see the enemy host for himself. Saul was encamped on a hill “beside the road on the east of Jeshimon” (1 Sam. 26:3). Arriving there, David spied Saul’s entire host asleep on the ground. Seeing Saul himself at the center, with his general Abner nearby, David proposed to go down to the king in his camp. He asked, “Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?” His nephew Abishai, the son of Zeruah, David’s sister, agreed. “So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and Abner and the army lay around him” (1 Sam. 26:7). Just as his followers urged David in the cave of En Gedi, Abishai asked David for permission to “pin [Saul] to the earth with one stroke of the spear” (1 Sam. 26:8). David refused: “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD’s anointed and be guiltless?” (1 Sam. 26:9). Instead, David decided to take Saul’s spear – so well known as the symbol of Saul’s hatred against him – and the water jar near the

king's head. With these possessions, David and his companion stole away into the night with no one waking, since "a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen upon them" (1 Sam. 26:12).

David gave Abishai two reasons for not slaying Saul. The first was that God's people must never seek their own benefit by violating God's Word. Saul had been appointed king by God and must therefore be shown reverence and respect (see Ex. 22:28). We see this principle affirmed in the New Testament when Paul commands that Christians "be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1). Gordon Keddie writes: "We are to fear God and honour the king. We are to pray for princes and those in authority. We are to recognize that God has instituted civil government and it is to be obeyed."² This does not involve rendering to Caesar what belongs to God, as Scotland's King James required, nor does it justify violating God's law in order to keep the commands of men, but it does require respectful conduct toward the person and office of civil rulers. David's example urges us that this respectfulness is especially called for at times when God's people may be in opposition to government policies. In a democratic nation like America, where citizens have the right to contest the policies of its leaders, Christians must be careful still to treat national, state, and local officials with the personal respect due to one who has been established in office by God.

David also realized that it would be sinful to take personal revenge against Saul, a lesson that had been magnified in the previous chapter. Abishai's lusty offer to pin Saul to the earth with his spear shows all the marks of vengeance for Saul's earlier attempts to pin David to the palace wall with that same weapon. Alexander Maclaren comments, "Abishai represents the natural impulse of us all – to strike at our enemies when we can, to meet hate with hate, and do to another the evil that he would do to us."³ To do this is to sin, David knew. As Abigail had reminded him in the recent episode with Nabal, the taking of vengeance incurs blood guilt before the Lord. Later, during the civil war that followed Saul's death, David would be glad that he had not endorsed the blood-thirsty methods of Abishai and his

² Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 244.

³ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions on the Whole Bible*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1982), 2:369.

brothers, at one point complaining, “these men, the sons of Zeruah, are too harsh for me” (2 Sam. 3:39, NKJV).

On this occasion, David did not struggle with temptation to strike Saul in personal vengeance. We can see the reason by looking closely at his answer to Abishai in verses 9-11, in which David cites the name of the Lord no less than five times. This shows that the way to restrain our sinful passions is to keep God constantly in mind, remembering his Word, submitting to his will, and honoring his name.

David’s second reason for sparing Saul was that God’s people should not force God’s providence. Here was the lesson learned in chapter 25, in David’s dealings with foolish and greedy Nabal. In his wrath over Nabal’s insults, David had been on the brink of committing mass murder, until Nabal’s gracious wife Abigail intervened. In the aftermath, God had taken care of Nabal in a better way than David could ever have devised. David had learned from this to wait upon the Lord in the confident hope that God will work things out justly and wisely. David exercises his sanctified imagination in verse 10, telling Abishai, “As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish.”

David’s growth in grace involved his awareness of God’s sovereignty in the affairs of men, combined with God’s goodness, justice, and wisdom. Knowing that he served an omnipotent, sovereign, faithful God who had promised his salvation, David preferred to await God’s solution to the problem of Saul rather than to force his own. How much better was it in years to come that David waited for God’s timing and God’s solution in dealing with Saul. The moral and spiritual authority so necessary to David’s kingdom would have been impossible with Saul’s blood on his hands. David reasoned that if God intended for him to be king, and if Saul’s wickedness stood in the way of his reign, then God would take action against Saul. William Blaikie laments, “Alas! Into how many sins, and even crimes, have men been betrayed through unwillingness to wait for God’s time!”⁴ Rather than taking matters into our own hands when

⁴ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 376.

confronted with a hostile employer, abusive parents, or even a persecuting government, God's people are to wait upon the Lord in prayerful humility, refraining from anger and violent retribution. To be sure, David defied Saul so far as his duty to God required, just as Margaret Wilson humbly refused to vow King James as sovereign over her soul. But both were blessed by humbly obeying God's Word as they patiently awaited God's timing for their deliverance.

One way to encourage our faith while we wait upon the Lord is to take note of the many helps that God provides. Consider the mysterious sleep that placed Saul's army at David's mercy. David may not have known it, but "a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen upon them" (1 Sam. 26:12). Believers can be assured of God's constant aid and protection, even in trials, as David wrote in Psalm 34:7-8: "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them... Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him."

The result of David's growth in grace was a corresponding increase in his spiritual authority among the people. In the previous chapters, while David was learning these lessons, the events related mainly to David himself. But now, armed with a gracious obedience in God's Word, David is placed in a position of great spiritual usefulness to others. Having grown in grace he is equipped to lead God's people.

Notice, for instance, the significance of his removal of Saul's spear. This weapon had become the symbol of Saul's regime, an ever-present emblem of his royal militancy (see 1 Sam. 22:6). There it stood, impaled in the ground by the slumbering king, and David realized the significance of its removal. This symbolized the ends that David's leadership served: the removal of sin from the realm and a commitment to peace among God's people.

Notice, as well, David's boldness in reproving the failure of Saul's army. This is the first time that David addresses not only Saul but speaks with authority to those who served the king. He upbraids them for falling asleep on watch, a capital offense in practically every army throughout history. Having moved to a safe location, David directed his rebuke at Abner, Saul's general: "Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept

watch over your lord, the LORD's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is and the jar of water that was at his head" (1 Sam. 26:15-16). What has given David the spiritual authority to assume this leadership role? One answer is God's calling on his life to sacred office, but inseparable from this calling is his example of personal godliness in obedience to God's Word.

DAVID'S LAST WORDS WITH KING SAUL

Throughout 1 Samuel, we have seen David contrasted to king Saul. From the start, David was intended as God's replacement for the apostate leader (see 1 Sam. 13:14). In this chapter we see them together for the last time, Saul advanced in his depravity and David growing in God's grace. On these respective courses, time has served only to widen the gap between the two; imagine how great is the gulf when advanced into eternity. We are reminded that more important than where we are at any one time is the question of how we find ourselves with God. Those, like David, who trust God's Word in humble faith will find themselves growing in grace, starting right where they are. Those, like Saul, who harden their hearts against God's Word, set their feet on a darkened path downward into depravity, a path on which even present virtues are sure to be corrupted and destroyed.

Although we will see Saul again in this book, David would not see Saul after this night-time meeting at the camp. David had reproved Abner, when Saul awoke and recognized the voice: "Is this your voice, my son David?" David answered, "It is my voice, my lord, O king" (1 Sam. 26:17). This final interview contains three emphases that continue to exhibit David's growth in grace. David was a realist about Saul and did not sentimentalize this opportunity to speak. Instead, David took the opportunity to seek the greatest good for Saul's soul, beginning with a sincere call for his tormentor to repent.

David's call for repentance took the form of questions: "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands?" (1 Sam. 26:18). As in their prior meeting at En Gedi, David pled his innocence while presenting proof of his good will – the spear and water jug that evidenced his sparing of Saul's life. Despite this good will, Saul's servants had made David a virtual exile

from the land of promise. The persecution was tantamount to removing David's "share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods'" (1 Sam. 26:19). This statement reflects the theology of geography at work in the Old Testament, since one needed to worship God at his tabernacle to benefit from the atoning sacrifices made there. Saul was driving David into the cursed condition of paganism by depriving him of God's sacred ordinances. For what reason has Saul allowed his government to be dominated by the mad pursuit of one mere servant – a loyal one, at that? "The king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains" (1 Sam. 26:20). With these words, David confronted Saul with his mad folly, calling him to repentance.

Many Christians will find themselves driven out from families, career fields, or other blessings due to sinful resentments and hatred. Like David, they should take prudent steps to protect themselves and should refrain from sin while waiting on God's deliverance. But as they have opportunity, believers should calmly reason in an attempt to bring repentance. This same model applies to political action in a secular state. Christians should boldly speak truth regarding matters of sin, calling the government to repentance, but we must be able to do so with evidence of our own godliness and good will.

David, of course, realized that a mere call to repentance would not likely strike home in a hardened heart like Saul's. Therefore he added a second message, a call to true religion. We see this in verse 19: "Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD."

As David understood the situation, there were two likely sources for Saul's mad wickedness. The first was God's wrathful chastisement. Saul should consider that his impaired reason may have resulted from God's judgment on his sins. This is not a message that people today, any more than Saul, are likely to receive happily. But David continued by reminding Saul that God has provided a way of cleansing and restoration to his favor, namely, the blood sacrifices of atonement. David knew that in these offerings, God promised forgiveness and peace, and in this way he looked forward to the coming of the true and great sacrifice, God's own Son, Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist identified Jesus in just these terms, crying out, “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29).

David was, in effect, offering to go with Saul to the Lord for their mutual appeal to the sacrificial blood for forgiveness and renewal. This appeal sets an example for us in our dealings both with hostile individuals and with a hostile culture. When faced with intractable hostility, we should invite those who oppose us to meet us at the level ground beneath Christ’s cross, taking the place of sinners who appeal to God’s grace in Christ’s blood. Here, for instance, is where marital harmony is gained and where marital strife is dealt with: by mutual confession of sin and mutual appeal to forgiving grace. Likewise in the Christian witness before the world, we must not merely denounce sin under God’s judgment, but we must also show forth the cleansing grace of God in the blood of Christ by which even our most fierce opponents might be forgiven and restored to God.

David couples with this appeal a warning about the danger of evil company: “if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD” (1 Sam 26:19). Once we are reconciled to God through Christ’s blood, we must shun the counsel of the wicked if we are to remain in the blessing of God’s peace.

As happened in their prior meeting, Saul responded to David’s pleas with a superficial repentance: “I have sinned,” he confessed. “Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake” (1 Sam. 26:21). Some would have us believe that Christians must not only forgive but also immediately renew our trust on the basis of an assurance like this. David knew better. What was missing from Saul’s confession? The answer is that there is no turning to God and therefore none of the deep work in Saul’s life that alone could arrest the progress of sin’s corruption. Saul is happy now, realizing that David could have taken his life, but this good will lacked the resources to prevail. He is the portrait of those today who grieve the consequences of their sins but not their sinful condition, those who insist that they are sorry but resist dealing with their underlying evil by turning to God in true faith. True repentance on Saul’s part would have been expressed in a resolve to

depart for the altar of the Lord, there to deal with his great sin before God, only afterward to offer protestations of good faith to his injured servant.

David realized the superficiality of Saul's words, and this is probably indicated by his immediate reference to the notorious weapon in his hand: "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and take it" (1 Sam. 26:22). A repentant Saul would have begged David to keep it, if not destroy it, emblem that it was of his wicked corruption. David can only conclude by placing the matter into God's hands, reminding Saul that he will reap what he sows. "The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for the Lord gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the Lord's anointed" (1 Sam. 26:23). David's reward for his good faith and obedience to God's Word was not a relief from Saul's malicious pursuit, but rather a clean conscience before God and a resolved faith in God's vindication. As Christians, we should all have the same as our goal in every arena of strife – personal and public – acquitting ourselves peaceably, refusing the false peace of insincere repentance, while continuing to wait upon the God of both justice and grace.

As we continue in our studies of 1 Samuel, we will soon see how God's justice pursues and overtakes reprobate Saul. What a sad blessing it would be for David on that day to recall that in response to his just and gracious dealings, the last words he ever heard from Saul's mouth were those of vindication of his own cause: "Then Saul said to David, 'Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them.' So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place" (1 Sam. 26:25).

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On the same day that Margaret Wilson perished beneath the Solway waters, May 11, 1685, seventeen year-old Andrew Hislop stood before a royal firing squad. His crime had been assisting his mother in offering shelter to a religious dissenter and refusing to swear the worldly king as sovereign over his soul. When the guns were loaded, Andrew was told to cover his face. With the same assurance in God that David showed before Saul, the young

believer declined. “I can look you in the face,” he answered; “I have done nothing of which I need to be ashamed. But how will you look in that day when you shall be judged by what is written in this Book?” The muskets fired and the bullets tossed Andrew’s body to the ground, his hands still holding forth the Word of God to his murderers.⁵

David had come to realize that if he was to serve as a true king in service to the Lord, then he must commit himself to be a righteous king, trusting the Lord, waiting on God’s timing, and submitting himself in obedience to God’s Word. In the years to come, David would exhibit a mixed record of success, although Israel would prosper under his generally righteous rule. More importantly, David typified the greater and truly righteous king who won the dying allegiance of both Margaret Wilson and Andrew Hislop, an allegiance they would not surrender upon even pain of death. Both refused the allegiance of a sin-maddened world that they might find salvation in the realm of the true and righteous king of heaven. Both, in their own way, reminded their persecutors of the righteous judgment before which every sinner must someday stand.

The writer of Hebrews, ministering to yet another body of afflicted believers, made the identical appeal. He wrote to remind a group of persecuted Jewish Christians that there is a true and righteous king in whose hands we may safely rest our souls. In Jesus, we see a king who has himself secured the righteousness in which we may stand before the judgment throne of God. Hebrews 1:8-9 declares to him, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” While the evil powers of this world may have their day, Hebrews 1:11-12 continues: “they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.”

It was in the robe of Christ’s righteousness that David, together with the Scottish martyrs, desired to stand before the affront of earth’s

⁵ Smellie, *Men of the Covenant*, 386-387.

wicked rulers. It was for that righteous kingdom that he desired to offer his life, as should we today. He would learn, as all the martyrs have surely discovered in glory, what he wrote in Psalm 37:16-18:

Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked.

For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous

The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever.