

MARCHING WITH THE ENEMY

1 Samuel 29:1-11

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David said to Achish, "But what have I done? What have you found in your servant from the day I entered your service until now, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king? (1 Sam. 29:8).

The historical books of the Bible are not bare records of past events, but theologically and pastorally shaped narratives. To this end, they are written with remarkable skill, employing careful construction for the sake of suspense and meaning.

One example was the narrative flow of 1 Samuel chapters 24 to 26, which present David growing in grace while Saul declines in depravity. An even better example is chapters 27 to 31, where the sacred historian manipulates the time-line to make his point with subtlety.

To see this narrative craftsmanship, we should line up the action in these final chapters of 1 Samuel. In chapter 27, David seeks salvation from Saul's malice by turning to the Philistines. In chapter 28, Saul seeks salvation from God's rejection by turning to an occult medium. In chapter 29, David is saved from the Philistines and in chapter 31, Saul is destroyed by the Philistines. The point of this arrangement is not that David is wiser or more virtuous than Saul (though undoubtedly, he is). The point is that David's relationship with the God of grace makes the vital difference. David is saved from his error, while Saul, having turned his heart way from the Lord, is destroyed in his folly. The lesson of these chapters is summarized by David in Psalm 118: "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation... The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death (Ps. 118:14, 18).

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We can see that the inspired author has rearranged events by noting the geography in the progression of these chapters. ¹ Samuel 28:4 shows the Philistines and Saul facing off at Shunem and Gilboa, in the rich northern region of Galilee which the Philistines had invaded. In chapter 29, however, David is back with the Philistines at Aphek in the Plain of Sharon over thirty miles to the south. This means that chapter 29 not only shifts the action from Saul to David, but takes us back several days to the Philistine mobilization. When last we saw David, he had unexpectedly been promoted to the bodyguard of the Philistine lord, Achish. The writer left us hanging, wondering how David would ever get out of this predicament. Having heightened our suspense by shifting the action to Saul's night of spiritual darkness, we now return to resolve David's dilemma. The writer clearly intends for the suspense to heighten our awareness of how great a problem David had arranged for himself.

The mention of Aphek is ominous, since this was the Philistine camp in the battle when Israel was swept away, the ark of the covenant was captured, and after which Eli the high priest died (1 Sam. 4:1). This disaster had contributed to the appointment of Saul as the king demanded by the people to lead them against the Philistines. Although David does not know it, we know that Saul's death in the coming battle is preordained. John Woodhouse writes: "What happened once at Aphek before Saul became king was about to happen again and bring his reign to an end. In the end the king 'like all the nations,' who would 'go out before us and fight our battles' (1 Sam. 8:20), had failed."¹ We wonder what might have been going through David's mind as he joined the Philistine assembly at Aphek, but it is hard to believe that he did not grasp the distressing irony of his presence in the Philistine camp at such a time and place. Taking matters into his own hands instead of waiting for the Lord had not worked out so well in the end.

We might summarize David's problem this way: having foolishly sought salvation through the Philistines, he now needs to be saved from his friendship with the Philistines. Previously, David's problem

¹ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 521.

had been the hatred of Israel's apostate king Saul. How great a problem that seemed at the time! But now David has a problem that threatens more than just his life: David must now be saved from his alliance with the enemies of God. For sixteen months, David had cunningly navigated his precarious situation, making the Philistines think that he was helping them against Israel while making sure that he did no actual harm to God's people. As generally happens, David's cunning was unable to control the variables and his intrigue was revealed as a falling house of cards. The worst of all scenarios had occurred: his new Philistine lord had gone to war against Israel. With the Philistine army, including David, mobilizing against God's covenant people, David was hemmed in to a decisive choice that would determine his fate. If David showed loyalty to Achish, his new lord, he must now be wholly opposed to his own people Israel. David would be an apostate, in the lamentable condition later described by the apostle Paul: "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But how could David extricate himself from his obligations to the Philistines? As so often happens when God's people dabble in sin and worldliness, David was now "farther in" than he imagined possible, perhaps so far in that he would never get out.

At this point, we should reflect on how David's story speaks to God's saving plan that would culminate in the coming of Christ, and how David's life sheds light on our faith today. One way in which we have often treated David is as a type who foreshadows the person and work of Jesus Christ. This was classically the case in David's victory over the Philistine giant, Goliath. But having crossed over to the Philistines, David no longer functions as a forerunner of Jesus. How, then, does David's experience here point forward to the new covenant and inform the lives of Christians today?

The answer is that having stepped out of his type-cast as a forerunner of Christ, David is now a typically wayward servant of God. He has made a classic mistake to which we are also prone: attempting to lead a double life with respect to Christ and the world. David had sought a temporal salvation from the Philistines while he sought his eternal salvation with God. David was like a person today who wants to go

to heaven and so professes faith in Jesus. But he also wants financial security, so he hoards his money and follows the stock market with religious devotion. He wants a satisfying career, so he compromises his integrity as needed in the workplace. He wants pleasure and approval, so he drinks from the trough of sensual worldly entertainment. And desiring an eternity in heaven, on Sundays he pays his respects to Jesus Christ at church.

What is the problem with this approach to life, with David's quest for earthly security among the Philistines and eternal security with God? The problem is that the two are at war! The situation is described by the apostle Paul: "what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?" (2 Cor. 6:14-15). In the end, David could not maintain his allegiance to the Philistines – together with their approval and protection – without abandoning his loyalty to God, and vice versa. So it is for the professing Christian. In order to gain an earthly salvation from the world you will not be able to live the life of faith that is required of those who hope for heaven through Jesus Christ.

Reflecting this way on David, we realize that he is not only similar to many professing Christians today, but he has especially become like his nemesis Saul. How distressing a realization this is, since we know that Saul's judgment of death was right around the corner! Israel had demanded Saul because they wanted a "king like the nations" (1 Sam. 8:20), and Saul was taller, more handsome, and more resourceful than his peers. David, in turning from his reliance on the Lord, had cast his future on his own possession of similar qualities. Just as Saul's unbelieving pragmatism was leading him to ruin, so also had David's unbelieving pragmatism put him between a rock and a hard place.

There was, however, one decisive difference between David and Saul. The difference was David's relationship with the Lord. Saul, having hardened himself to the Lord, had ultimately been repudiated by God. David, however, had not yet lost his faith. Ultimately, the difference between the two men – the reason why one was an apostate to be judged and the other a backslider to be lovingly disciplined – is the sovereign grace of God. God's preserving grace is undoubtedly the reason why David's faith prevailed. This is the point being made by

the writer as he arranges the scenes at the end of 1st Samuel. Whereas the decisive factor in Saul's failed kingship was his reliance on strength, skill, and cunning, David's kingship would rest on a different foundation altogether. David himself was to learn that for all of his prodigious ability, his self-reliant plans had led him to the brink of eternal ruin, so that his true and only hope lay in the grace of his saving God.

This venture into Philistia represents the most spiritually dangerous period of David's life. David had crossed the line, violating his faith in God, when he passed over from Israel into the sanctuary of Philistia. Yet while his faith had failed it had not died. We see this in David's sixteen months campaign against Israel's enemies, during which he refused to act as an enemy of God's people even though he had sought succor in the refuge of Israel's enemies. David had not apostatized. He had not forsaken trust in the Lord. But David had failed nonetheless. Saul's persecution had overthrown him, so that if David's flight to Philistia had not disqualified him for Israel's kingship it had brought him to within a razor's edge of doing so. All David had left was the grace of God to deliver him. The events of this chapter and those to come show that God's grace is enough. The grace of God, if that is all we have, is enough to deliver us from evil – the world's evil and our own – and lead us into salvation.

SEND HIM BACK!

Ironically, when God was pleased to deliver his wayward servant from the vise in which he had stuck his head, it was the Philistines that the Lord used as the instrument for saving David from the Philistines. To see this we return to the Philistine muster at Aphek. “As the lords of the Philistines were passing on by hundreds and by thousands, and David and his men were passing on in the rear with Achish, the commanders of the Philistines said, ‘What are these Hebrews doing here?’” (1 Sam. 29:2-3).

The Philistine nation was ruled by the lords of its five chief cities, of whom Achish was one. As the various lords with their forces arrived at the muster, they were aghast to see Israelite troops present. Achish thought he could explain easily enough, but his answer proved more troubling yet: “Is this not David the servant of Saul, king of Israel,

who has been with me now for days and years, and since he deserted to me I have found no fault in him to this day” (1 Sam. 29:3). These Israelites were mercenaries, he explained, and they had proved to be reliable in his service. We see here that David’s duplicity had been wholly successful in duping Achish, who believed that David had betrayed his people and left himself no choice but to throw in his lot with the Philistines.

The other Philistines were not so easily persuaded, however, and they pressed their argument with anger at Achish. Their first argument consisted of an appeal to prudence: “Send that man back, that he may return to the place to which you have assigned him. He shall not go down with us to the battle, lest in the battle he become an adversary to us. For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his lord? Would it not be with the heads of the men here?” (1 Sam. 29:4). A number of commentators suggest that, based on the evidence, the Philistine lords had correctly divined David’s intent. The last thing they wanted as they launched into battle with Israel was an armed band of Israelites to their rear.

In addition to the argument from prudence, the Philistine leaders argued from history: “Is not this David, of whom they sing to one another in dances, 'Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands'?” (1 Sam. 29:5). This theme song to David’s military glory, struck up in earlier days by the adoring women of Israel, had caused David more trouble than it was worth. It was hearing these lyrics that first turned Saul’s heart in envy against his faithful servant. The Philistine commanders were irate that Achish could possibly be so naïve as to think it safe to include David – *the David – the Bible’s David!* – in the order of battle for their invasion of Israel.

The Philistine lords correctly assessed the situation with regard to David. If they had Bibles, they could have provided numerous proof texts for their arguments, starting in Genesis chapter 3. Why is there always an incompatibility between God’s people and the world? The main reason is that God has willed it to be so. When Adam and Eve cast our race into the fall by their disobedience to God’s command, the Lord responded with a series of curses on all the participants: the serpent, the woman, and the man. The purposes of these curses were both penal and redemptive. In particular, God cursed the serpent,

behind which stood Satan, with these words: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

This foundational promise of our salvation, known by theologians as the *protoevangelion*, or first-gospel, establishes two priorities. The first is hostility between the woman and her offspring and Satan and his offspring. This refers to the line of believing children who would come from Adam and Eve and the line of the unbelieving, worldly people who would follow in the sinful ways of the devil. These two lines appear in the very next chapter, Genesis 4, when unbelieving Cain so resented God’s favor for his believing brother, Abel, that he slew him in anger. The second gospel priority was that a particular offspring of Eve would be born to overthrow the reign of Satan and sin. “He shall bruise your head,” God promised the serpent, “and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Satan struck his blow against Jesus Christ when he arranged his tortuous death on the cross. In the process, however, Jesus crushed the head of Satan, casting down his rule over Christ’s people by paying the penalty for their sins in his own blood.

What the Philistine lords sensed, and what David should have known from his Bible, is that these two priorities necessarily go together. Those who belong to the Savior so as to be forgiven and justified with God are also people who experience the hostility of the unbelieving world and who thus cannot successfully collaborate with the ungodly. Jesus told his disciples: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:19). A David cannot ultimately march in the ranks of the Philistines because of a God-established enmity between the two.

David’s example in this chapter shows that this enmity between God’s people and the world is established for the protection of believers. The world’s pleasures and treasures are tangible to our senses whereas the blessings of heaven are invisible apart from faith (2 Cor. 5:7). Therefore, lest God’s people should be so foolish as to cultivate collaboration with worldly powers, God has placed an enmity in the hearts of the world towards his people. While David

could comfortably endure his alliance with the Philistines, the Philistine commanders looked upon a servant of the Lord with a God-ordained hostility, so that they objected, “What are these Hebrews doing here?” (1 Sam. 29:3). Christians who realize this biblical priority, along with the Bible’s command to a moral and spiritual separation, if not always a physical separation (see Ex. 33:16), will be neither surprised nor dismayed by the hostility of the world but will recognize God’s protective care over our eternal souls.

PRAISE OF THE UNGODLY

If the Philistine lords were hostile to David’s presence, Achish could not say enough in David’s defense. One of the ironies of this chapter is that almost half of its content involves Achish defending David’s loyalty, when in fact David has not been loyal to him at all!

After receiving the angry demands of his fellow rulers, “Achish called David and said to him, ‘As the Lord lives, you have been honest, and to me it seems right that you should march out and in with me in the campaign. For I have found nothing wrong in you from the day of your coming to me to this day. Nevertheless, the lords do not approve of you. So go back now; and go peaceably, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines’” (1 Sam. 29:6-7). We would think that these words represented to David his deliverance from a dire situation, that of marching with the Philistine army in battle against Israel. How surprising it is, then, to hear David’s indignant objection: “But what have I done? What have you found in your servant from the day I entered your service until now, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?” (1 Sam. 29:8). Apologetically, Achish answered David, “I know that you are as blameless in my sight as an angel of God. Nevertheless, the commanders of the Philistines have said, ‘He shall not go up with us to the battle.’ Now then rise early in the morning with the servants of your lord who came with you, and start early in the morning, and depart as soon as you have light” (1 Sam. 29:9-10). Achish is sorry that David is so unfairly denied the opportunity to march against his own people, agreeing that David has earned the privilege. Nonetheless, the Philistine lords had spoken and there was nothing else to be done. The chapter thus concludes: “So David set out with

his men early in the morning to return to the land of the Philistines. But the Philistines went up to Jezreel” (1 Sam. 29:11).

What is David doing? There are two schools of thought. One is that David is merely carrying forward his false loyalty to its necessary end, lest his duplicity should be suspected. Matthew Henry expresses this view, writing, “He seemed anxious to serve him when he was at this juncture really anxious to leave him, but he was not willing that Achish should know that he was.”²

The other view of David’s objection is that the Philistine lords had accurately perceived David’s true intent, namely, to turn on them in the heat of battle so as to strike a decisive blow for Israel. Clues of this intention may be gleaned from David’s conversation. Notice how taken in Achish is by David, swearing by David’s God (1 Sam. 29:6) and declaring David as “blameless in my sight as an angel of God” (1 Sam. 29:9). David has apparently been emboldened by Achish’s incompetence so that he speaks in language that is capable of multiple meanings. He expresses his zeal to “go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king” (1 Sam. 29:8). Achish assumes that David is referring to him as the king and Israel as his enemies, whereas David may well be speaking in deceptive language designed to justify himself in all events. The language “my lord the king” is David’s habitual designation for king Saul (see 24:8; 26:19), and the title that would be used of him on countless occasions after he assumed the throne of Israel. This interpretation of David’s words is certainly consistent with the brazenness with which David has lied to and deceived Achish from virtually the moment he arrived. If this understanding is correct, then David was sincerely trying to overturn the order of the Philistine lords, so that might put into action his desperate plan to redeem himself and rescue Israel by means of a sneak attack from within the Philistine ranks.

How may we assess this concluding section of the chapter? First, we should note that praise from unbelievers is often commendable. The conduct of God’s people should be such as to earn the honest approval of even worldly leaders, neighbors, and co-workers. Matthew Henry writes: “God’s people should behave themselves

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:341.

always so inoffensively as if possible to get the good word of all they have dealings with; and it is a debt we owe to those who have acquitted themselves well to give them the praise of it.”³

The problem in this case is that Achish praises David not because of services well rendered and honestly presented but because of David’s success in deceiving his Philistine lord as to his actual behavior. David is like an employee who gains promotion not through honest work and achievement but through the falsification of reports and the stealing of credit from others. In this respect, Achish’s praise merely shows how deeply David has compromised himself by seeking a salvation according to his own wit and wisdom. The Bible commands God’s people to candor and honesty, especially when dealing with people who have a right to expect integrity from us: “let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no,” says James 5:12. The only reason David was praised by Achish is that the Philistine thought David had betrayed his own people, that he was wickedly serving as a piratical traitor in raiding the people of Israel, and that David could therefore never go home and was stuck in his service to the king of Gath. In other words, David’s praise from Achish results from his dishonest manipulations and from Achish’s approval of the wickedness he thinks David is performing. Praise like this is not the commendation that gains approval from God.

David’s approach to gaining the praise of the world is one that many professing believers adopt today. They try to become as much like the world as possible without ultimately renouncing their faith in Jesus Christ. In this respect, we see that the hostile Philistine lords show better judgment than Achish, who comes across as a weakling and a fool. The other Philistine lords looked on David and his followers and objected, “What are these Hebrews doing here?” (1 Sam. 29:2). They did not esteem a believer like David merely because he wore Philistine colors, and they did not trust a man who pretended to be a Philistine though in heart still an Israelite. Alexander Maclaren writes of this kind of compromised follower of Christ: “Do you think that the world respects that type of Christian, or regards his religion as the kind of thing to be admired? No; the

³ Ibid.

question that they fling at such people is the question which David was humiliated by having pitched at his head – ‘What do these Hebrews here?’ ‘Let them go back to their mountains. This is no place for *them*.’ The world respects an out-and-out Christian; but neither God nor the world respects an inconsistent one.”⁴

Second, we note that, once again, David is saved by the interfering grace of God. We can imagine him frustrated as he departs from Aphek, taking his armed band away from the decisive battle of that generation. How difficult it is for believers to leave behind their worldly-wise cunning in order to wait on the Lord in obedience to his Word! This is a lesson that virtually all believers find it difficult to learn, but which God is determined to teach us through many trials and gracious deliverances.

What would have happened, we wonder, if the Lord had permitted David to pursue what seems to have been his plan on this occasion? Would David have succeeded, marching in the Philistine ranks to the battle lines opposed to Saul? How would he and his men have reacted when they looked across the plain and saw their neighbors, their cousins, and the banners of Israel waving in the “enemy” host? It is possible, especially for a man as gifted and charismatic as David, that he could have pulled the strategy off, striking into the Philistines’ backs at the decisive moment of the battle and saving the day for themselves and for God’s people. But how great were the risks and how serious the repercussions even in success! What foreign king would ever trust such a David, when he became king, and how could his followers ever be sure what their leader really meant when he spoke with such multi-shaded words and displayed such practiced deceit? Moreover, what excesses might David turn to next if he should succeed in so reckless and precarious a plan as the one he hatched in Philistia? The Lord’s opinion of David’s stratagem may be gleaned by the divine veto of providence, God instead saving David from the Philistines and from himself by means of the suspicions of the Philistine lords. It will be interesting when we view our own lives from the perspective of heaven, how many occasions we will have to thank the Lord for interventions that frustrate us now

⁴ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions on the Whole Bible*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1982), 2:382-3.

but are actually saving us from our folly and unbelief. David may have appeared as blameless as an angel to Achish, but his conduct did not stand up well in the actual presence of the angels of God.

In his grace, God delivered David from his folly and from his enemies. One result of David's venture into worldliness, however, is that he was absent from the great battle of his people in that generation. To be sure, the blame for this largely rests on king Saul for driving David out of Israel. Yet David, by consulting his own counsel instead of God's Word, by stirring up his own cunning instead of appealing to God in prayer, pursued a course of action that rendered him useless in the day of his peoples' need. The same is true today of many Christians who have adopted the ways of worldliness rather than pursuing the path of godliness set forth in Scripture, who live as close as possible to the world instead of as close as possible to God. Many such people will be saved in the end, through a weak but nonetheless saving faith in Jesus Christ. But in the battle for truth and godliness in our generation, in the work of the gospel for the saving of souls, they will have contributed virtually nothing. Paul writes that in the day of Christ's coming, "each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it." He who builds his life on the rock of God's Word and has pursued a life of faithful, godly ministry will find his work to have survived, and "he will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:13-14). But others, who lived in constant compromise with the world, will find their life's contribution burned up as dross, however impressive it may have seemed to worldly eyes. Of such a person, Paul writes, "he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Cor. 3:15, NIV). So it was for David as his band marched away from the battle back to his base at Ziklag.

NO GUILT IN HIM

I have said that David in Philistia no longer functions as a forerunner of Jesus Christ. Yet, in the words of Achish to David, we hear an advanced echo of words that would be said to Jesus in his trial before his crucifixion. Achish said to David, "I have found nothing wrong in you from the day of your coming to me to this day" (1 Sam. 29:6). In the light of God's revelation, those words regarding David

are proved to be false. If the world should say the same of us, the light of truth will reveal them to be false as well. But in his trial before Pontius Pilate, these very words were said of Jesus Christ. Pilate declared of Jesus: "Behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him" (Lk. 23:14). Having examined Jesus thoroughly, Pilate rendered a verdict that stands up in the courts of angels and of God: "I find no guilt in him" (Jn. 18:38).

It is only because these words, falsely spoken to David, were true of Jesus Christ, and because Jesus did not save himself from the penalty of death our sins deserve, that we like David have a Savior to deliver us from evil. The great difference between David and Saul, and the difference between Christians today and the unbelieving world, is not that we are found worthy of praise, with no guilt or folly on our record. The difference is that we have embraced by faith the Savior who is alone worthy of this praise, and who by his sacrificial death has freed us not only from the condemnation of men but also from the condemnation of God, so that we may serve him in the battle for this age and afterwards enter into eternal life. Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).