



PART 8 - David Spares Saul's Life (1 Sam. 24:1-22)

June 7, 2023 - Chris Altrock

Reading

1 Samuel 24:1-22 (NRSVue)

As the text is read aloud, highlight, underline, note what grabs your attention:

24 When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the wilderness of En-gedi." 2 Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel and went to look for David and his men in the direction of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. 3 He came to the sheepfolds beside the road, where there was a cave, and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave. 4 The men of David said to him, "Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.' " Then David went and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. 5 Afterward David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. 6 He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him, for he is the Lord's anointed." 7 So David rebuked his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul. Then Saul got up and left the cave and went on his way.

8 Afterward David also rose up and went out of the cave and called after Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground and did obeisance. 9 David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of those who say, 'David seeks to do you harm'? 10 This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave, and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not raise my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed.' 11 See, my father, see the corner of your cloak in my hand, for by the fact that I cut off the corner of your cloak and did not kill you, you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you are hunting me to take my life. 12 May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you, but my hand shall not be against you. 13 As the ancient proverb says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness,' but my hand shall not be against you. 14 Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A single flea? 15 May the Lord, therefore, be judge and give sentence between me and you. May he see to it and plead my cause and vindicate me against you."

16 When David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” Saul lifted up his voice and wept. 17 He said to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. 18 Today you have explained how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands. 19 For who has ever found an enemy and sent the enemy safely away? So may the Lord reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. 20 Now I know that you shall surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. 21 Swear to me, therefore, by the Lord that you will not cut off my descendants after me and that you will not wipe out my name from my father’s house.” 22 So David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

Notices

1. What do you notice? What stands out to you? What questions do you have?

(Notice these points of tension)

2. The use of 3,000 men to capture one man (v. 2)
3. The contrast between what David’s men believed the Lord wanted and what David believed the Lord wanted. (v. 4 V v. 6)
4. The contrast between David refusing to take Saul with his own hands yet calling upon God to do that very thing. (vv. 8-15)
5. David calls Saul “father” (v. 11); Saul calls David “son” (v. 16)
6. Saul’s ongoing pursuit of David versus his conclusion that David is to be king (see v. 20).

(Other noticings)

7. The narrative hinges on the power of nonviolent response to violence.

Commentary/ Application

1. General

- a. Several scholars believe this account and the one recorded in 1 Sam. 26 are the same account, told in different ways.
- b. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *The narrative reports the slow, steady working out of God’s purpose. David need not hurry that process, even as he need not doubt it. Saul cannot thwart the resolve of God. David is a man on the way to power, ordained of God.* (174)
- c. Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, 1997): *The story of David in the wilderness of En-gedi is bracketed by two other wilderness stories: on the one side is the forty years that Moses led the Israelites through the Sinai wilderness; on the other the forty days that Jesus fasted in the Judean wilderness. Three great wilderness stories in our Scriptures, each influencing the others ... In the Moses wilderness story the people of Israel were trained to discern between idols and the living God, taught to worship; through their wilderness experience they were prepared to live totally before God. In the Jesus wilderness story our Lord learned to discern between religion that uses God and spirituality that enters into what God does, and he was thereby prepared to be our Savior, not merely our helper or advisor or entertainer. In the David wilderness story we see a young man hated and hunted like an animal, his very*

humanity profaned, forced to decide between a life of blasphemy and a life of prayer--and choosing prayer. In choosing prayer he entered into the practice of holiness. (75)

- d. *Fifteen stories are told out of David's wilderness years. The meeting of David and Saul in the wilderness cave near En-gedi is one of the early ones. (76)*
 - e. **Can you think of a wilderness time in your own life? How did God use that wilderness time?**
2. Cave Scene 1 (1-7)
- a. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *In the brief narrative of verses 1-7, Saul is completely passive. He neither says anything nor does anything. The conversation is between David and David's men. (167)*
 - b. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *Saul returns to Gibeah to focus on David. When his intelligence network informed him of David's whereabouts, he immediately assembled an elite fighting force 'from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men' (v. 2). Having made a journey of more than thirty miles, the royal troops centered their efforts in the vicinity of the 'Crag of the Wild Goats,' an otherwise unidentified rock outcropping near the Dead Sea. As the troops made their way down a path cut by shepherds driving their flocks, they came to a series of 'sheep pens along the way' (v. 3)--suggesting a favorable campsite for Saul's men--and a nearby cave. There Saul 'went in to relieve himself' (lit., 'to cover his feet'). Providentially, the cave that Saul chose to use was the same one in which David and his men were hiding. Saul's vulnerability during this private moment was extreme, and David's soldiers knew it. In fact, the situation was so extraordinary that David's men concluded God made it happen to fulfill the prophetic words, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish' (v. 4). This prophecy is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture and probably represents an example of false prophecy (cf. 1 Kgs. 22:11-16); alternatively, it may have been a genuine prophecy related to non-Israelite enemies misapplied to Saul. (238-239)*
 - c. **David's men apparently use something not Scripture, as Scripture, in order to give permission to mistreat Saul. Even if Scripture, it's still being marshaled to permit the men to kill Saul. What Scriptures (or phrases thought to be Scripture) are used in similar ways today?**
 - d. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *He 'cut off a corner of Saul's robe.' This act was far from meaningless because 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. Furthermore, by removing the corner of the robe, David made Saul's robe to be in noncompliance with Torah requirements (cf. Num 15:38-39; Deut. 22:12); thus Saul's most obvious symbol of kingship was made unwearable,. In essence, David had symbolically invalidated Saul's claim to kingship. (239)*

- e. 37 The Lord said to Moses, 38 “Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. 39 You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. (Num. 15)
- f. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *As Gunn observed (1980, pp. 92-95), this gesture is richly nuanced, capable of several different readings. First, the piece of the robe is evidence that Saul was indeed at the disposal of David, and David refused to dispose of Saul. David has spared the king’s life! Second, the double use of ‘cut off’ (vv. 4-5) suggests an act which would have terminated Saul, Saul’s future, and Saul’s heirs. The same verb ‘cut off’ is used three times by Jonathan in his passionate plea for David’s steadfastness (20:14-16). Third, Gunn suggests that to ‘cut off the skirt’ is a playful euphemism for cutting off the penis and so rendering Saul helpless, void of manhood, and bereft of a future. (168)*
- g. *By voiding Saul’s claim to kingship, he was at some level lifting his hand against ‘the anointed of the LORD’ (v. 6). This was more than an act against the king; it was rebellion against the LORD, who had commanded Israelites not to curse their rulers (Ex. 22:28) (239)*
- h. What seems significant to you about David cutting off the corner of Saul’s robe? Can you think of a modern equivalent?**
- i. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *As the narrative presents it, however, David’s loyal heart prevails. David is the one to be after Yahweh’s own heart (13:14; cf. 16:7). Now his sensitive, obedient heart is smitten. He regrets this act against Saul and refuses to go further. (168)*
- j. What do you learn about David’s heart in this narrative? What would it look like to emulate that heart today?**
- k. When have you responded to violence with non-violence?**
3. Cave Scene 2 (8-15)
- a. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *The section of text stretching over vv. 8-21 contains the longest recorded quotes by both David (114 Hebrew words) and Saul (67 Hebrew words) found in 1 Samuel. The amount of space the author devoted to these two quotations suggests that he considered them to be thematically central. Close inspection of these quotations does not disappoint us, for they are seen to contain at least two major items: David’s most passionate affirmation of loyalty to the king and Saul’s confession that David would be Israel’s next king. (239-240)*
- b. What are some contemporary speeches that have been significant to you?**
- c. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *David speaks first. His is a self-serving speech, intended to show the innocence and graciousness of David. The speech intends to put David in the right and therefore, inevitably, to put Saul in the wrong ... David uses explicitly juridical language (vv. 12-15). He wants to be vindicated and acquitted in the eyes of*

Saul--or at least in the eyes of listening Israel--and asks Saul to consider carefully the evidence, the kind of evidence proper to a court of law. (169-170)

- d. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *Rather than cursing his ruler, David honored him by calling him both 'my lord' and 'the king.' Rather than falling upon Saul in a murderous attack, David fell upon the ground 'and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.' Following these verbal and actional signals of loyalty to the king, David uttered what is perhaps the most passionate and eloquent plea for reconciliation between two persons recorded in all ancient literature. (240)*
- e. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *First, he discussed the eyewitness evidence ... David ... carefully walked Saul through the immediately past events, supplying details to emphasize the extreme danger from which the king was delivered ... Second, David presented material evidence to support the interpretation of events just given: a 'piece of your robe in my hand' (v. 11). If there was any doubt in Saul's mind about how close his brush with death really was, this evidence would remove it ... Finally, David led Saul to the desired verdict: he was 'not guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion.' (240-241)*
- f. **What stands out to you about David's speech?**

4. Cave Scene 3 (16-22)

- a. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990): *'Saul lifted up his voice and wept' (v. 16). He weeps because he must now face what he has long known. He weeps because he must now confront the truth he has avoided. In the moment of confronting the reality of David, Saul must face the truth of his own life. No wonder he must cry, for he must acknowledge not only that David will win and that he will lose but that his whole effort to be faithful, effective, and powerful, and even righteous has failed. (171)*
- b. *In verse 20 Saul utters the words for which the narrator has been waiting: 'I know.' In 23:17 Jonathan had reported to David, "Saul my father also knows this.' but we had only Jonathan's word for it. Now we have the conclusion in Saul's own mouth. We have known all along about David's certain triumph. The narrator and Jonathan have known. The commonly shared knowledge about David's future means nothing unless Saul knows ... Finally in a desperate instant of truth, Saul says, 'you shall be king.' (v. 20). The clause in Hebrew has an infinitive absolute for emphasis ('being king you shall be king') and should be rendered, 'You shall indeed be king.' Saul now is the last one to authorize David. Saul knows nothing can stop the coming rule of David. (172-173)*
- c. Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996): *the king launched into the longest unbroken quote credited to him in Scripture (67 Hebrew words). He began by exonerating David, noting that the young man was 'more righteous than' himself (v. 17); whereas David treated Saul 'well,' that is in an ethically commendable manner; Saul had treated David 'badly,' that is, wickedly. (242)*
- d. *He affirmed God's royal intentions for the younger man: 'you will surely be king' (v. 20). In making this confession, Saul confirmed the words of his son Jonathan (cf. 23:17) ... Saul was emotionally crushed by the circumstances and in this state*

set aside all pretense of superiority to David. Begging him to grant two requests, he first asked that his successor 'not cut off my seed' (v. 21)--that is, that David not follow the ancient Near Eastern custom of exterminating all descendants of his dynastic predecessor ... Second, he requested that David not 'wipe out my name from my father's family,' a request closely related to the first but emphasizing the preservation of a link between Saul and his forebears ... Without hesitation 'David gave his oath to Saul' ... David would later fulfill this commitment by giving sanctuary--indeed a position of honor and generous inheritance--to Mephibosheth (cf. 2 Sam. 9:1-13). (242)

e. What stands out to you about Saul's speech?

Lectio Divina Questions

(Stephen J. Binz, *David: Shepherd and King of Israel* (Brazos, 2011): 44-46)

- 1. In what ways does this narrative of David suggest an alternative to the way of violence and arms in solving conflicts? What insights from this account might apply to conflicts between people today?**

- 2. What area of my life is in need of discernment? How can I make the decisions I need to make in order to move more confidently into the future?**