
The Pursued

1 Samuel 23²²

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Psalm 52:1, 5, 8

¹ Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?
The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

⁵ But God will break you down forever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*

⁸ But I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever.

This song of faith and assurance can be heard throughout this chapter. Our story picks up from dreadful slaughter of priests by the (sic) King of Israel. Saul had become like all true tyrants. He begun to slaughter his own people and “had added mass murder to the instruments of his government.” (Keddie, p. 124).

Saul’s crimes are easily understood in the darkness of human depravity and despotic history. Tyrannical power removes sin’s restraints. The fears and follies of Saul’s heart have reached out and slaughtered the priests of the Lord at Nob. Their only crime was to serve when their high priest served and supported David. Only one escaped, the future priest under David, Abiathar by name.

One writer has helpfully commented, “There is, however, a deeper level to be considered, namely the interplay of human evil and the will of God. God’s purposes are never thwarted by human sin. Even though monstrous evils may be perpetrated against the Lord’s people, the Lord has promised that the very gates of hell shall not prevail against his church. The ‘wrath of man’ will praise the Lord (Psalm 76:10 AV).”

Keddie goes on to identify three strands of the Lord’s purposes being worked out.

The first is the fulfillment of the warnings of what would happened in an unrestrained monarchy. The people would groan and cry out for relief. The very first king, Saul, has

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brought much evil and suffering upon his people. So the people cry out for relief from the king they cried out for.

The second strand is the fulfillment of the eventual destruction of the house of Eli. God had pronounced judgment on Eli's house. Saul wickedly massacred Eli's household of priests. Yet God had righteously permitted what was wickedly performed.

The last strand emerges in the story before us. David is confirmed in his calling and anointing as king. What he does henceforth is to establish himself and to grow into that moment of God's ordination when he will become the monarch of Israel.

Trusting in God and His steadfast love, the future king will be like an olive tree in the house of the Lord. But there are dark days to pass before when the sapling will endure much.

In Fighting

(v.1-12)

In the first of three movements, David goes to the town of Keilah to defend it against an old enemy.

The Deliverer

(v.1-5)

David saves his people.

¹ Now they told David, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors." ² Therefore David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the Lord said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." ³ But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" ⁴ Then David inquired of the Lord again. And the Lord answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand." ⁵ And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah

The Philistines are once again on the move. They have moved against a town called Keilah, fighting and pillaging there. In the harvest time, it was common to raid a neighbors fields to deprive them of food and provide for yourself. In their need, David's help is sought.

David inquires of the Lord who responds by sending him on the mission. But his men are fearful. They will be going deep into the territory held by Saul and going to war against their old arch-enemy. His mighty men are deeply concerned. To confirm David seeks the Lord again. The Lord promises him victory. So David goes down with his small army and God grants a great victory in a single battle.

The Lord's king moves to save his people from their enemy. He does so with wisdom and courage. He assures his followers, having the promise of God. With a mighty blow, he strikes the enemy. As John woodhouse pithily said, "As Saul was overseeing the

slaughter of the priests of Nob, David was saving the people of Keilah! Saul the destroyer – David the savior.” (Woodhouse, p. 448)

The Dialog

(v.6–12)

Our narrator gives us some backstory. The scene at the end of chapter 22 seems to have occurred in Kiliah. The lord answers David.

⁶ When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand. ⁷ Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, “God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.” ⁸ And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. ⁹ David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod here.” ¹⁰ Then David said, “O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. ¹¹ Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, please tell your servant.” And the Lord said, “He will come down.” ¹² Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the Lord said, “They will surrender you.”

So Abiathar has fled from the slaughter of the priests at Nob. He has brought with him, the ephod. He has sought refuge with the future king. David has delivered the people of Kiliah. David promises Abiathar shelter and safety. God in His Divine providence has brought the future king and future high priest together.

Meanwhile, Saul learns where David is. Gleefully Saul thinks David has made a tactical mistake. He has entered a walled city and can easily be trapped in there. To make matters worse, the men of Kiliah are prepared to hand David over to Saul. One commentator notes, “The power of Saul must have been terrible. No blame is laid by David, the Lord, or the writer on the people of Keilah. We are merely left with the impression that the fear of Saul’s fury against anyone who aided David was greater than whatever gratitude they felt to the one who delivered them from the Philistines. They had heard about Nob!” (Woodhouse, p. 451)

But how are we to know that all this is God’s ordination? How do we know that David and Abiathar are truly the appointed and anointed ones? Remember, this is written much later than the events. It is to show the rise and legitimacy of the kingship of David.

The point in this question and answer dialog between David and God is to authenticate the Abiathar and David. God answers David’s inquiries through Abiathar who wears the ephod. This is God’s way of not only answering David, but of authenticating both.

In Friendship**(v.13-23)**

Before the people of Keilah can turn David over to King Saul, David and his men leave for the hill country of Ziph. I think this verse shows us the kindness and graciousness of David. Rather than stay and bring the wrath of Saul down on Kiliah, he leaves with his 600 men and goes into the hill country of Ziph

The Chase**(v.13-14)**

¹³ Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. ¹⁴ And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

David departs from Kiliah before he is handed over to Saul. This keeps the people there from being exposed to Saul's brutal rages - remember Nob. He goes out into the hill country in the wilderness of Ziph.

Saul canceled the expedition to Kiliah when he found out that David had left the city. But Saul continues his murderous pursuit of David. He kept after David day after day. Yet the Lord preserves and protects the life of David. David is choosingly wisely as he hides from Saul. But the Lord is also not delivering David over to Saul's hand.

The Covenant**(v.15-18)**

Someone else is also seeking David.

¹⁵ David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. ¹⁶ And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God. ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this." ¹⁸ And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.

Jonathan finds David near Horesh There is an irony here. Saul who is avidly hunting for David cannot seem to find him and is always missing him. Yet Jonathan, almost easily, is able to go to where David is hiding and meet with him. That is the difference between being David's foe and being David's friend.

Jonathan reaffirms their covenant of friendship. He recognizes that David will be the next king of Israel. This has to be encouraging to David but hard for Jonathan. David being the next king means Jonathan will not. Yet, Jonathan is not competing or scheming for the crown. He is submitted to the Word and the will of God. He gladly will abide by the covenant they made together.

The Conspiracy

(v.19–23)

While the men of Kiliah were ready to hand David over if Saul came, the men of Ziph make an offer to capture David and hand him over.

¹⁹ Then the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, “Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon? ²⁰ Now come down, O king, according to all your heart’s desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king’s hand.” ²¹ And Saul said, “May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me. ²² Go, make yet more sure. Know and see the place where his foot is, and who has seen him there, for it is told me that he is very cunning. ²³ See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah.” ²⁴ And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul.

²⁴ And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul.

Some Ziphites bring Saul precise, detailed information that he had been wanting. They told the king exactly where to find David. They revealed David’s general location (“the strongholds at Horesh”). They identified the actual hill where David was hiding (“the hill of Hachilah”), and its general direction and location (“south of Jeshimon”). While we sympathize with David, in their minds this is likely seen as loyalty to the appointed king. They are turning in the hiding place of a dangerous rebel against God’s appointed king.

Look at Saul’s view of himself. He is the victim. They have had compassion on Saul! What? Saul is hunter. Saul is the vicious, angry, unpredictably violent murderer. And he is fearful, cautious, hesitant. “Go scout David out. Make sure. Have you been fooled; after all I am told he is cunning.” If by this time Saul has to be told that David is cunning, then Saul is pretty dense. David is fooled him and tricked him over and over again. And we haven’t seen anything like we are going to see in the next chapters.

Do you see the structure here?

David is pursued

David is encouraged

David is betrayed

In Fleeing**(v.24-29)**

Now the chase is on. Saul moves out to encircle and capture David.

Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon.²⁵ And Saul and his men went to seek him. And David was told, so he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon.²⁶ Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain. And David was hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them,²⁷ a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land."²⁸ So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape.²⁹ And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi.

The Pursuit**(v. 24-26a)**

Word comes to David that Saul knows where he is and is on the march. Since his location has been pin-pointed, David flees deeper into the wilderness to "the rock", probably a mountain fort in the wilderness. But Saul discovers where David is hiding. In movie-like scene as Saul's army is moving one side of the mountain to attack the fortress, David is hurrying down the other side of the mountain to escape.

The Providence**(v. 26b-28)**

From the text, it seems that Saul had laid a trap that David was getting ready to enter. Saul was closing in on David as he fed down the mountain and out into the wilderness. But God is not going to give David into Saul's hand. Just in the moments that David's capture seemed imminent, a messenger rides breathlessly up.

"King Saul. The Philistines have attacked. The kingdom is in danger. You have to come now." This message has to be of such danger facing the nation that Saul would break-off his pursuit. He reorganizes his army and heads out to confront the true enemy, the Philistines.

David has escaped once again. He takes up residence finally in the strongholds of Engedi. Many scholars believe that the strongholds referred to here were the early ones built in Megiddo.

So the narrative opens and closes with the Philistines. God has used David to save a town from this great enemy of Israel. But now, God has used them to save David from his own great enemy.

Reflect and Respond

The heading to Psalm 54 tells us that it was written about this time in David's life, though it was published many years later during the regency.

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, "Is not David hiding among us?"

¹ O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.

² O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

³ For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. *Selah*

⁴ Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.

⁵ He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.

⁶ With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.

⁷ For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

In all our troubles and trials, here are the words of faith and trust:

God, I come to you in prayer for Your help.

My trouble is very real and difficult, but not beyond you.

Listen, my brothers, God will help us all because He is faithful.

God, I come to you in praise because of Your help.

