
The Innocent

1 Samuel 24²³

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Have you ever been tormented by someone?

A coworker? A fellow student? A spouse? A family member?

What would you do if you had the chance to bring it to an end?

What is the place of vengeance and pay back?

Let's think together about how David responded to this kind of situation...

A Providential Circumstance

(v. 1-7)

¹ When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of Engedi." ² 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. ³ And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, 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 And the men of David said to him, "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.'" Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe. ⁵ And afterward David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul's robe. ⁶ He said to his 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." ⁷ So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul. And Saul rose up and left the cave and went on his way.

An Unrelenting Pursuit

(v. 1-2)

Our story ended last time with Saul going to deal with the Philistines who were once again raiding Israel's farms. We left David living in the strongholds in Engedi which may have the early location of the Megiddo fortresses. When Saul returned to his home and headquarters, he was told of the whereabouts of David. He is determined to pursue and destroy David. The fortresses of Engedi are going to require a large force, which Saul gathers up and heads towards Wild Goat's Rocks.

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An Opportune Moment**(v. 3-4)**

The journey takes them by some sheep folds in front of a cave where the shepherds could rest, sleep and eat to be out of the weather. There they halt for a royal restroom break. What they do not know is that David and his men are holed up in the cave. They are sitting deep in its recesses out of ear shot. Imagine the scene. David and his six hundred sitting very still deep in the cave. Outside the rustling and clatter of 3,000 soldiers. And the royal tinkle. How incredibly vulnerable Saul is in this moment.

David's men can read the providence of God. This is a God moment, an opportunity by divine appointment. They have a prophecy given by Samuel. This is it. So David crawls carefully into the room. Saul's robe is likely lying on the ground near Saul but apparently behind him. David's long, sharp sword flashes. It slices, not across Saul's throat but across the royal garment.

A Smitten Conscience**(v. 5)**

What a tender conscience. David's heart convicts him because he has cut off a piece of the robe. He is tender towards God. Even when vengeance or even plain justice would have justified Saul's death he recognizes that what he has done is to strike out at the king.

Do not forget that many years earlier, Samuel's robe had been torn by Saul. Then, the prophet Samuel use symbolic act to show that the kingdom had been torn from Saul. Did that moment rise up in David's memory? Did he equate his act with Saul's? Had he done something that would be the equivalent - to tear the kingdom from Saul and to take it unlawfully and sinfully?

A Gracious Restraint**(v. 6-7)**

And so, he explains his heart to his men. This is the Lord's anointed king. The Lord put Saul in power and the Lord can take Saul from power when it is time. But David recognizes that to kill Saul is to rebel against God's appointment and the king God gave. This is not the time *to take* what was only God's *to give*. This is not a time for vengeance or murder or rebellion. This is a time for mercy, restraint and obedience. So he persuades his men not to attack Saul but to let him go on his way unharmed.

A.W. Pink wisely wrote: "An accurate knowledge of God's Word, a holy state of heart ... a broken will, are absolutely essential in order to clearly discern the path of duty in important cases and crises. The safest plan is to deny all suggestions of revenge, covetousness, ambition and impatience. A heart that is established in true godliness will rather interpret the dispensations of Providence as trials of faith and patience, as occasions to practice self-denial, than as opportunities for self-indulgence." [(Woodhouse, p. 224) citing A.W. Pink, p.116].

A Humble Confrontation**(v. 8-15)**

David has taken a piece of Saul's robe. Maybe with it in hand, he can so plead his innocence that Saul will no longer see David as a threat to the throne and to Saul's life. Maybe finally *Saul will listen to David*.

⁸ 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. ⁹ And David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of men who say, ‘Behold, David seeks your harm’? ¹⁰ 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.’ ¹¹ 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. ¹² May the Lord judge between me and you, may the Lord avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. ¹³ As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes wickedness.’ But my hand shall not be against you. ¹⁴ After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea! ¹⁵ 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.”

A Submissive Call

(v. 8-9)

Listen to the voice of the pursued.

As Saul is leaving the cave, David emerges at the entrance and calls out to Saul. This not a loud, obnoxious challenge. It is a humble and submissive call. David acknowledges both in his words and in his actions his submission to his lord, the king.

A Penetrating Question

(v. 9)

Why do you listen to voices that tell you I mean you harm?

David’s question uncovers something we would not necessarily have known. We have been told several times that people have told Saul where David is. The implication is that they have encouraged Saul to go after David. But David understands that in the court are people who do not want David to become the king. They will lose their place, position and power. They have been whispering in Saul’s ear that David is leading a rebellion to kill Saul and take the throne. Why does he listen to such voices?

A Personal Confession

(v. 10-11)

I do not listen to voices that told me to do you harm.

David declares that what has just happened was the providence of God. God gave David the opportunity (but not the right) to kill Saul. His men pressed him to take advantage of the divinely given opportunity. But David did not listen to the voice of his men, of those who counseled disobedience to God and disrespect of the king.

So David holds up the piece of the robe that he had cut off. Can’t you see Saul grabbing the hem of his robe and staring at it with his heart in his mouth? He was that close to having Goliath-slayer’s sword send him to his Maker. David holds it up as evidence that he means Saul no harm. He addresses now as “my father”. He is invoking the relationship of love and respect they once had. The Lord, who has not delivered David into

Saul's hand despite Saul's avid pursuit, had delivered Saul into David's hand. Yet because there is no treason or murder or rebellion in David's heart, he has spared Saul. He has done so even though Saul has relentlessly pursued David without cause.

A Gracious Promise

(v. 12-13)

Listen to my voice that respects your kingship and regards your life.

David raises his voice and in one sense his hand to heaven. Yes, it is a hand that holds a piece of royal garment, but it is not a blood stained hand. David calls on the Lord to witness both to David's purity and to David's promise. Citing a proverb, David makes a promise. "I will do you no harm." David's hand, that Goliath slaying that Philistine destroying, that robe-cutting hand will not be raised against Saul. It will not be raised against God's anointed. It will not be raised against God. One writer says, "If David was holding the symbol of the kingdom in his hands, he was also holding the symbol of his innocence, his faithfulness, and his kindness toward Saul." (Woodhouse, p. 467)

But what about this proverb? How is it being used? Again, John Woodhouse is so helpful:

The obvious implication of the proverb is that Saul had acted wickedly because he was wicked, but David quickly deflected that implication by applying the proverb positively to himself: if David was wicked (as Saul seemed to believe), he would have done the wicked thing — lifted his hand against the king.

But ever so dangerously, David did turn the thought of the proverb toward Saul: "After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea!" (v. 14).

The question echoed the proverb almost too closely. "From the wicked *comes out* wickedness." "After whom has *come out* the king of Israel?"

The thought was not allowed to develop, however, because David quickly again deflected it to his own insignificance. He was not so much pretending that he was a completely unimportant person as emphasizing the inappropriateness of Saul's hunting of him. He was no more a threat to Saul than a dead dog or a single flea on a dead dog! (Woodhouse, p. 467)

A Powerful Plea

(v. 14-15)

Please listen to the decision and declaration of the Lord.

In the face of the great threat and danger from all the enemies of Israel, why do you pursue such a small, insignificant person? And so David calls upon the Lord in the presence of Saul, to vindicate David's righteousness and innocence and to deliver David from Saul's hand.

So do you hear the call to listen?

- Listen to the voice of the pursued.
- Why do you listen to voices that tell you I mean you harm?

- I do not listen to voices that told me to do you harm.
- Listen to my voice that respects your kingship and regards your life.
- Please listen to the decision and declaration of the Lord.

A Repentant Confession

(v. 16-22)

The sword of truth humbly, lovingly wielded has a devastatingly good effect.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ He said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. ¹⁸ And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And now, behold, 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 offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." ²² And David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

Is this repentance genuine? We know that it was not permanent. But is our narrator showing us a Saul who responds to godly confrontation with repentance and change? Or is this another example of worldly sorrow that simply leads to death? Do we have a repentant confession?

In the Response to David's Voice

(v. 16)

Saul recognizes the voice of David. He remembers the days when David was treated as "my son" He listens to David's appeal. It pierces his heart so that tears flow. He weeps. He is sorrowful over his actions.

In the Affirmation of David's Innocence

(v. 17-19a)

Saul affirms that the person he has sinned against is more righteous than himself. David, when given the opportunity, has responded to Saul (and the nation, by the way) with good. Saul confesses that he has responded to David with sin. Yes, he still sees himself in some way as being comparatively less righteous than David. But Saul calls what he has done, sin.

In the Invoking of David's Blessing

(v. 19b)

Saul asks God to bless David. Instead of seeking David's death, Saul now seeks David's good. He wishes for David the Lord's reward in David's life.

In the Acknowledgement of David's Future

(v. 20)

Saul knows that the reward of blessing for David will be his ascension to the throne. This has to be hard for Saul. But yet he clearly accepts David's future kingship. HE also

affirms that David will accomplish what Saul has been unable to complete – the full establishment of the monarchy and the kingdom.

In the Appeal for David's Protection

(v. 21)

Saul elicits a promise that David will protect and provide for Saul's descendants. It was common for kings to kill the children of a deposed king so that there could be no competing claim to the throne. And David so promises. What a sweet, amazing story that will be when David keeps this promise and does good to a broken, crippled descendent of Saul for the sake of Jonathan.

In the Cessation of David's Pursuit

(v. 22)

Saul turns away from seeking David's life. Here is the culmination of repentance from conflict and anger and murder. There is the simple cessation of hostilities. But David may not be quite so sure. He returns to the strongholds where he has hidden and has been kept safe.

Here again, the text is intended to defend David from later accusations of ruthless hostility to Saul and his *descendants* (21). The chapter makes it abundantly clear that David not only spared Saul's life but also took a solemn *oath* to spare the lives of Saul's family after him. The emphasis in David's words on the sacredness of the king's person and life may have been a sermon to later men and groups who wished to overthrow kings by assassination or rebellion. (D. A. Carson, p. 317)

Reflect and Respond

Gordon Keddie summarizes the appeal of David this way. Listen to how this can guide our own response to those who may be trying to do us harm. (Keddie, p. 226)

He declared his innocence of the charges falsely brought against him by those to whom Saul had listened (24:9).

He declared his commitment to principle, in that he had not raised his hand against the Lord's anointed (24:10).

He presented practical proof of the truth of his words by producing the portion of robe he had cut off in the cave (24:11).

He solemnly declared that judgment belonged to the Lord and indicated that he had no intention of exacting justice by his own hand in the future (24:12).

He appealed to his known personal history as a proof of his harmlessness to Saul and a confirmation of the veracity of his words (24:13).

He expressed true humility (24:14).

He cast himself upon the mercy of God (24:15).

David was constrained by the grace of God. And he won a gracious victory. David's mercy was a greater victory than his vengeance could have ever been.

The New Testament speaks clearly to the obligations of Christians to the governments that God places over them. What Paul wrote to Christians under the despotic rule of Rome is derived from a Biblical theology of government.

No man had the right to attack or kill the person of the King of Israel.

No one had the right or authority to kill the Lord Jesus Christ. He was truly the King of the Jews, the son of David, the rightful king of Israel's throne.

We are to honor and submit to the government God gives us.

This is what Paul instructs us in **Romans 13:1-7**

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

We may not rebel against the "king". To resist or rebel against the government God has give us is to resist and rebel against God.

We may seek change government within the law or the means that God gives us through the nation's laws.

We are to be faithful to pay our taxes and to give proper honor and respect. May I remind you that Paul wrote this around the time of the Roman Emperors, Nero and Caligula.

David was absolved of all charges that he was trying to overthrow or destroy Saul. HE was innocent of all charges. He had been severely sinned against. He had a sensitive conscience. Even when given the opportunity to strike back and to exact vengeance and to grasp what he had been given, he did not do it. He refused to strike out at God's anointed. He was willing to wait for God to act.

Brothers and sisters, may I commend to you that the Lord Jesus, like David, has shown mercy and grace and restraint and patience. He has been sinned against by every one of you. Yet the Lord speaks to you His Word and calls you to repentance, confession, blessing and cessation of hostilities against the true King. Will you hear His voice? Will you repent?

Finally, may I call you to walk in the steps of David and our Lord. Listen to the words of Peter in **1 Peter 2:11–25**

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.