

## CROSSING THE LINE

1 Samuel 27:1-28:2

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Then David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand" (1 Sam. 27:1).

**A** number of years ago, a society for the spread of atheism published a tract exposing the depravity of various Bible heroes. Under the face of Abraham an inscription read that here was a coward who was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife to save his own skin. It lists where the Bible admits this and then where the Bible calls him "the friend of God". "What kind of God," it asks, "would befriend so dishonorable a man?" Under Jacob's picture is the Bible's description of him as a liar and a cheat, and also where God makes him the prince of his people. What does this say about the character of a deity who would call himself "the God of Jacob". Next came their reminder that Moses was a murderer, yet God picked Moses to bring his law into the world. David was worst of all. He seduced Bathsheba and then had her husband killed to cover it up. Yet this is "the man after God's own heart," the leaflet reminds us. What kind of God could find so much to praise in a man like this, they ask, and why would anyone serve him?

How do we, as Christians and followers of the Bible's God, answer this? The first thing I would say is that everything the atheist tract says is true. It is true – no, it is a glorious truth – that the heroes of the Bible, excepting Jesus Christ, are all scoundrels and criminals, breakers of God's law and sinners to the core. This, by the way, shows the Bible's honesty; no other religious tome dares to display

the human weakness and sins of its heroes the way the Bible does, because the Bible is not trusting in man but in God.

Furthermore, it is true that God saves people like this, making them his own friends and children and servants. God “justifies the ungodly,” Paul writes (Rom. 4:5). So we agree on this with the atheists. The difference is that we see this as God’s glory and not his shame. Since we are sinners like the people in the Bible, the fact that God saves sinners commends him for our affection instead of subjecting him to our disdain.

## OUT OF ISRAEL

**I**n the Bible’s long account of the life and reign of David, there are numerous incidents that show his need of God’s forgiving mercy and grace. Probably foremost among them is the account of David’s sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). But another prominent chapter displaying the weakness of David’s flesh is 1 Samuel 27. David’s sin with Bathsheba shows David’s weakness in his time of strength and power, whereas this chapter shows David’s weakness in time of anxiety and affliction. The commentators are virtually unanimous in their harsh denunciation of David’s decision to flee king Saul by taking refuge among Israel’s enemies, the Philistines.

The argument against David’s actions centers on his sudden failure to believe the promises of God. We see this both in the fact of David’s flight from Israel and in the location to which he fled. As is typical for David when he is not acting by faith, the account of his actions is sudden and brief: “Then David said in his heart, ‘Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand.’ So David arose and went over, he and the six hundred men who were with him, to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath” (1 Sam. 27:1-2).

David flees from Israel because he has persuaded himself that “the hand of Saul” is about to prevail in taking his life. This is a remarkable assessment given the abundance of evidence in his recent experience that the hand of Saul was impotent against God’s protective care over David. In chapter 23, Saul was about to stretch

out his hand and seize David when a sudden assault of the Philistines diverted his forces (1 Sam. 23:27-28). In chapter 24, when Saul came hunting for David, the Lord placed Saul at David's mercy in the cave of En Gedi. More recently, God placed a deep sleep on Saul's entire army so that David could enter the camp and remove Saul's spear. All of this was strong evidence of Saul's impotence against God's promise to raise David to the throne. When Abigail intervened to deflect David from his violent plans against her husband Nabal, she spoke of these things as common knowledge. "If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the LORD your God" (1 Sam. 25:29). How, then, does David now conclude, "Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul" (1 Sam. 27:1)? The chapter begins by saying that "David said in his heart." David counseled his heart with unbelieving words, so it is no wonder that his heart responded not in faith but in folly and unbelief.

David's unbelief was seen in his flight from Israel, but his folly lay in his return to the enemy city of Gath. David had fled here before, at the beginning of Saul's persecution, and the result had been nearly disastrous (1 Sam. 21:10-15). On that occasion, David saved himself from the Philistines' malice only by pretending to be insane. How can David now think to find safety in such an ungodly place? A. W. Pink ascribes David's folly to a tendency to unbelief that every believer experiences: "Alas, when unbelief dominates us, God is forgotten, and deliverance, our own ease, obsess the mind; and hence it is that – unless divine grace interpose – we seek relief in the wrong quarter and by unspiritual means. Thus it was here with David: he and his men passed over unto Achish, the king of Gath."<sup>1</sup>

This assessment of David's actions is indisputable. Yet we should still listen to David's explanation. One thing David meant when he spoke of perishing at Saul's hand was that in his assessment, Saul would never leave him in peace, despite his occasional expressions of repentance and promises of restraint. This assessment was completely accurate. As a result, there was no place in Israel where David could safely rest. His recent return to Ziph – a place where the

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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:183.

people had betrayed him once before, as they immediately did again – indicates that there were not many suitable sources of refuge in Israel for a band as large as David’s. David’s stressful encounter with Nabal in chapter 25 shows that David faced logistical requirements that could not easily be met while he and his followers were fugitives in the land. Verse 3 indicates that the care of his wives, Ahinoam and Abigail, was on David’s mind, in addition to the wives and children of his men, so that the total community under David’s care may have numbered around two thousand. How could David continue to subject his own wives, along with the families of his soldiers, to such deprivation and danger? On top of this was the wear and tear of all this stress on David’s own nerves. Dale Ralph Davis comments: “Hunted, tracked, and attacked by Saul; treacherously exposed; making thrilling escapes (e.g., 23:24-29) and executing daring escapades (e.g., chaps. 24, 26) – nine chapters full of high-blood-pressure narrative. It’s the stuff that makes great movies but takes its toll on real people.”<sup>2</sup>

We have an example here, I believe, of how it is easy for us to be piously critical of others without considering their very real difficulties. When considering biblical figures, we can easily offer a simplistic answer to their problems. If David trusted God, we might say here, he would simply ignore Saul’s threats in light of God’s promised care. We apply this same approach to situations today. When considering a pastor who faces opposition and criticism from his unspiritual and worldly congregation, we say, “He just needs to continue doing what the Bible teaches.” This is true, yet we little consider the social rejection that his wife and children endure and the effects of his daily diet of conflict, slander, and criticism. To give another example, we consider a Christian wife who faces emotional harassment, biting criticism, and harsh treatment from her husband on a daily basis. We rightly say that she needs to put her trust in God and honor her marital vows, yet we should also consider what wounds this emotional environment is inflicting on her heart. How different things look from the inside, and how much more charitably we assess our own compromises and failures when under trial than those of others.

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 224-225.

One answer that David would surely give to his critics is that prudence is not opposed to faith. The same God who promised him salvation also entrusted him with the care of so many lives. David's duty required him to take prudent steps to avoid danger. Trusting in God did not require David to trust in Saul and place himself at the king's non-existent mercy. Neither did trusting God's promise relieve David of the duty of finding a suitable base for his band. Jesus himself modeled prudence in his response to the threat of the Pharisees, showing that faith does not require a suicidal zealotry. In John 7, Jesus delayed going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles "because the Jews were seeking to kill him" (Jn. 7:1). None will accuse Jesus of unbelief for failing to walk into an open trap, even though Jesus was aware of God's care and protection. Even while trusting God's promise, David had to reckon with Saul's unceasing malice and his duty to God required him to seek a place of safety for his followers.

#### CROSSING THE LINE

**S**o which stance toward David is right: criticism or sympathy? Both are right, up to a point. Yet in the end, in joining up with the ungodly Philistines, Israel's enemy, David crossed a line that should never have been crossed. The language of verse 2 seems to acknowledge this point: "David arose and went over" (1 Sam. 27:2). John Woodhouse notes: "David crossed a boundary that day, and not just a geographical one. He 'went over' to the other side."<sup>3</sup> We can understand his need to find a safe refuge for his people, and his desire for a good night's sleep away from danger. We can imagine how difficult it was to find such a place in Israel with Saul as king. Yet there were places where David could not go without breaking faith, and one of these was Philistia.

One searches the Bible in vain for an example of Israelites seeking salvation outside the land of promise, appealing to the care of the ungodly, which did not entangle them in sin and the curses of unbelief. When Abraham sought refuge in Egypt, he quickly fell into sin and danger (Gen. 12:10-20). Lot destroyed his family by taking

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<sup>3</sup> John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 500.

them to Sodom (Gen. 13:10-13), as did the husband of Naomi when he took his family to Moab in time of famine (Ru. 1:2-3). The sons of Jacob were blessed with food from the royal granaries of Egypt established by their brother Joseph, but their sojourn in Egypt soon devolved into slavery (Ex. 1:8-14). Given these biblical examples, we cannot expect blessing to result from David's flight out of Israel and into Philistia.<sup>4</sup>

The same is true for the beleaguered pastor I mentioned earlier: for all our sympathy, there are compromises with his congregation that he cannot faithfully make, especially those involving the integrity of his Bible teaching. The same is true for an emotionally tormented wife or disappointed husband. There is a difference between steps of prudence in improving or managing a painful relationship, but to seek solace in the love of another man or woman or to pursue an unbiblical divorce is crossing the line into disobedience of God's Word. David crossed the line of disloyalty when he departed Israel for Gath, and he could not avoid harmful consequences from his action. We cross the line between prudence and the folly of sin, so that we are no longer trusting the Lord, when we violate our sacred vows or transgress the clear commandments of God's Word.

If we marvel at David's unbelieving actions, we realize that this episode fits a pattern we have seen on previous occasions. We read of no prayers to God for wisdom, no consultation of God's Word, and no appeal to the counsel of godly friends. The dynamics of godliness versus sin are usually straightforward and consistent. God has established means of grace to strengthen the faith of his people. When believers neglect these means of grace – the Word, prayer, and gathered worship – our faith wanes and our tendency to sin and folly grows. This poor example from a spiritual giant like David proves to us that especially when we are suffering under trials, Christians must hold fast to their Bibles, draw near to God in fervent prayer, and be especially devoted to the worship of God among his people. Isaiah said that “they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Isa. 40:31). In his panic, David had ceased waiting on the Lord's timing for his deliverance,

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<sup>4</sup> When Jesus' parents fled to Egypt at God's command, they went to the Jewish exiles there, not to the pagan rulers (Mt. 2:13-15).

casting himself along a path of unbelief that could only lead to sorrow.

## DAVID IN ZIKLAG

If it is true that David's last visit to Gath resulted in near disaster, it is also true that much had been altered since then. Previously,

David had been known to the Philistines as the slayer of their people (1 Sam. 21:11), but now he was famous as the fugitive from Israel's king Saul. Moreover, David now appeared with a formidable fighting force to add to the strength of Achish. Probably for these reasons, David was welcomed at Gath, and his settlement in Goliath's former hometown had the immediately desired result: "when it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath, he no longer sought him" (1 Sam. 27:4). David had succeeded in finally shaking of Saul's pursuit – but at what cost?

David immediately requested that his band be given their own town, rather than remain in the city of Gath. This arrangement seems to have been mutually agreeable. Achish can hardly have desired to have so large a force on his front porch, nor the obligation to supply so many mouths. David would be better able to pursue his own agenda farther away from official notice. The town of Ziklag was provided to David, probably near the southern Judean desert, and here David could operate independently of Achish and safe from Saul's reach. Ziklag, it turns out, was a town allotted to the tribe of Judah during the distribution under Joshua (Jos. 15:31), but had never been captured. Through his cunning, David secured this rightful possession of Israel, and verse 6 says, "Therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day."

Three themes arise from the sixteen months that David and his band lived at Ziklag in Philistia. The first is David's cleverness in managing a most delicate situation. By seemingly crossing over to the Philistines, he risked the ruin of his reputation in Israel. In fact, this is exactly what Achish thought was happening. 1 Samuel 27:12 states that "Achish trusted David, thinking, 'He has made himself an utter stretch to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant.'" This is exactly what David wanted Achish to think. David was not, however, conducting raids against Israel, as he told Achish

he was doing (1 Sam. 27:10). Instead, David was conducting warfare against Israel's historic enemies nearby: "against the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites, for these were the inhabitants of the land from of old, as far as Shur, to the land of Egypt" (1 Sam. 27:8). If we wonder how David was able to pull off so large a subterfuge for so long, the answer is given in verse 9: "And David would strike the land and would leave neither man nor woman alive, but would take away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels, and the garments, and come back to Achish."

Raiding warfare was David's expertise, and he was utterly effective in both wiping out his enemies and covering up his trail. David's motto in Ziklag was straight out of an old Western movie. His motto was that of many a bloody outlaw: "Dead men tell no tales." By means of systematic genocide he cleverly succeeded in prospering his people, winning the approval of Achish, and avoiding a formal betrayal of his native country. On the surface, David's cunning was winning the day. But the price he was paying was not hidden as easily as the identity of his victims. Gordon Keddie writes: "David was brilliant and successful, but he slaughtered whole communities and lied through his teeth to Achish in the process. He had left his principles in the mountains of Judah and boxed himself into a corner where deceit and ruthlessness were the staples that kept him alive."<sup>5</sup>

More positively, we should give David credit for devoting himself to the cause of his people and God's long-standing calling for Israel to complete the conquest of the promised land. David could rightly defend his actions, pointing out that while he was unjustly driven into exile he nonetheless did what he could to pursue the work of God and the well-being of Israel. Moreover, if we are repulsed by David's blood-thirsty tactics, he might point out that this wholesale slaughter was part and parcel of ancient warfare. Furthermore, these were all wicked nations under the ban of God's judgment. David was in fact fulfilling the holy war mandate that Saul had been punished for failing to carry out. "Go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have," the Lord had commanded Saul. "Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep,

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 251-252.



camel and donkey” (1 Sam. 15:2-3). For this reason, Robert Bergen sees reason only to praise David for his actions during this period: “David redeemed his time in exile, using it to resume Israel’s conquest of Canaan... Thus, David’s obedience to the Torah warfare regulations caused him to prosper.”<sup>6</sup> For all the truth in that assessment, it remains true that David was becoming practiced at deceit and lying, and thus at violating God’s law. Though Achish was a Philistine pagan, David had accepted his lordship and therefore owed him integrity. Moreover, while David was in fact executing God’s holy war judgment on the banned peoples among whom he raided, the text states that his slaughter was performed not for the glory and service of God but to further David’s own deceitful agenda.

A balanced reading of these events shows a mixture of faith and ungodly compromise on David’s part. The only real vindication for his actions is to argue that the ends justify the means. That is not, however, the ethic propounded in David’s psalms. After his earlier visit to Gath, David wrote: “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:13-14). This was hardly the motto of David’s sojourn in Ziklag! David reminds us what a difference there is in seeking the Lord’s deliverance versus achieving one’s own salvation by cunning and craft. It is no surprise that during the entire period of David’s time in Philistia we read nothing of prayer, worship, the ministry of priests, or God’s Word. In scrambling to work out his own salvation David was compromising the values he had so carefully protected in earlier days, setting an example that could not possibly serve his people well after David finally came into his kingship.

The third theme of David’s time in Ziklag fits this picture. For all his cunning, David was not able to manage unforeseen consequences from his deceitful actions. Chapter 27 ends with Achish thoroughly taken in by David’s deception. Chapter 28 begins, however, with an alarming result that David had never foreseen. “In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, ‘Understand that you and your men are to go

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<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 261-262.

out with me in the army” (1 Sam. 28:1). We can imagine David scrambling for something to say. He replied with as much ambiguity as he could muster, “Very well, you shall know what your servant can do.” Achish answered, “Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life” (1 Sam 28:2). The only suitable response to David is the saying designed to warn children against lying: “O, what a tangled web we weave, when at first we practice to deceive!”

## SPEAKING TO YOUR HEART

**O**ut of the folly of David’s unbelief in crossing the line into Philistia, and the tangled weave of deceit and compromise that resulted, there are at least three important lessons for us today. The first can be approached through the opening words of chapter 27: “Then David said in his heart.” The point is that our daily attitude of faith or unbelief depends in large part on what thoughts we cultivate and what we preach to our own hearts. In this respect, we can trace David’s downfall in chapter 27 to words that he spoke to Saul in the previous chapter, words that indicate the thoughts that were racing through David’s mind. “They have driven me out this day,” David complained, “that I should have no share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods.’” (1 Sam. 26:19). David had been feeling sorry for himself, nurturing resentment over the injustice of his situation in Israel, and thus playing in his mind thoughts that soon would take form in his actions.

This reminds us not only of the necessity of daily appeal to the Bible but also of the purpose of our devotion to Scripture and prayer, namely, to form our thoughts on things that are true and edifying, and guard us from sin and error. David had previously modeled this ministry of preaching to one’s own heart in Psalm 42:5: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.” In Psalm 73, Asaph tells a similar tale. He had become bitter over the unjust prosperity and happiness of wicked, unbelieving people and his heart was becoming hard. But then, he said, “I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin” (Ps. 73:17-18). In other words, once he returned to God’s house and placed himself under the

ministry of the Word he began thinking clearly about the judgment of the wicked and the salvation of those who trust in God. The result of this mind- and heart-control was a renewed faith that walked with uprightness before the Lord. Like David in Psalm 42, we must be sure to preach gospel truth to ourselves, and like Asaph in Psalm 73, we must be regular in attending the worship of the church, lest the dark strands of unbelief, fear, and resentment should weave a tangle in our minds.

Secondly, David's plan in fleeing to Philistia may be assessed by appeal to Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." We sympathize with David for the strain and fatigue that must have contributed to his actions, along with the burden of responsibility for so many men and their families. We can easily see how his cunning strategy would have appealed to him, especially given its early success in ridding him of Saul's pursuit. But in so doing, according to his own spur-of-the-moment cleverness, David crossed a line that placed his entire future in grave jeopardy. Despite months of success in duping Achish, David ends the episode being attached to the Philistine vanguard for an invasion of Israel.

The lesson is that true wisdom is always achieved by submission to the precepts and commands of God's Word. David would have done better by emulating a different proverb: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Prov. 3:5-6). In the end, it is not our job to save ourselves; as Jonah learned from within the great fish, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (Jon. 2:9). Proverbs does not tell us to abandon our own understanding, but it does tell us not to lean on our understanding. It is always God on whom we must lean, and if we are relying on the Lord to be our salvation we will find it easier to retain the wisdom of walking in the straight paths of his Word.

Lastly, David was foolish in fleeing from Israel because of the geography of salvation that is taught in the Old Testament. Once God had placed his people in the Promised Land, salvation was always, only, to be found there. In years to come, David would capture Jerusalem to be Israel's capital and then his son Solomon would build

the holy temple of the Lord there on Mt. Zion. Salvation would only come through those who came to the Lord there in his holy place. All of this prefigured the coming of Jesus Christ, in whom God dwells among his people. There is now no salvation outside of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). To flee to some other salvation when trouble looms, to quarrel with the obligation to obey Christ's Word so as to chart our own way, or to wander from the fold of Christ's church is to risk an eternal separation that far outstrips the danger that David courted in fleeing to Gath. Whatever else happens to us in life, whatever persecution we suffer or hardships we endure, whatever injustice we experience or crosses we must bear, we must remain in Jesus Christ, trusting in the only Savior for our sins and obediently submitting to his will. Ours is not to sort out our own salvation in life, but rather to flee to the salvation offered by God in Christ, holding fast to him in all things.

If we only remain in Christ, we can be certain that God will save us in the end, even as he will protect us according to his will along the way. Remaining in Christ through a persevering faith, as David should have remained in Israel, we can be certain of being present for the great day when all God's people will enter the full glory of salvation. It is therefore of Christ that we sing: "O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect! O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect! Jesus in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest; who are, with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard of Cluny, "Jerusalem the Golden, 12<sup>th</sup> c.