

1 Samuel 27:1-28:25

Introduction

We're approaching the end of this story of Saul and David. It's reaching its climax.

Last week, Saul had come after David once again. And once again, David had confronted him. After sneaking in and out of Saul's camp and taking his spear and water jug, he had stated his innocence and insisted that he meant Saul no harm. And Saul had admitted that he had been wrong about David. He had acted foolishly. He even acknowledged his sin. He blessed David. And on that note, they parted, and Saul went home.

And that's where we join the story again this week.

I've called our first heading: David's dilemma.

David's dilemma

Please look down with me at the opening few verses.

But David thought to himself, 'One of these days I shall be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.'

So David and the six hundred men with him left and went over to Achish son of Maok king of Gath. David and his men settled in Gath with Achish. Each man had his family with him, and David had his two wives: Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel, the widow of Nabal. When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer searched for him.

This time, circumstances are very different when David arrives in Gath. Last time, he had arrived on his own and been perceived as a threat. He'd had to feign insanity to escape. This time, he arrives with 600 men along with their families. And, presumably, recognising a useful mercenary force when he sees one, Achish welcomes him. He gives him Ziklag, where David remains for more than a year. He's hidden from Saul. And, just as importantly, he's hidden from the watchful gaze of Achish.

During that time, David uses Ziklag as a base from which to launch attacks on Israel's enemies. That might increase his popularity back home in Israel. But it's not going to go down well with Achish, since these are his allies. So, David hides it from him. He can't risk the truth getting back to Achish, so we're told that wherever he goes David leaves no one alive. He slaughters everyone. He tells Achish that he's been out raiding Israel herself. And all the while he brings *Achish* the spoils, Achish is happy. The deception works. He even begins to trust David, assuming he's turned against his own countrymen once and for all.

Look at verse 12.

Achish trusted David and said to himself, 'He has become so obnoxious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant for life.'

The plan seems to be working.

But then... the day comes that David must have dreaded. Achish gathers his forces to fight against Israel. 'David, you and your men are coming with me,' he says.

Awkward.

David gives a rather ambiguous reply, which Achish interprets positively.... And even makes David his personal bodyguard. For life!

And *now*, we might be asking ourselves, how David's going to get himself out of this one? He's caught between a rock and a hard place. If he goes with Achish and fights against the Israelites, his credibility in Israel will be shot to bits. His kingship over Israel will be forfeit. But if he betrays Achish, and turns against him, well... it's hard to see Achish leaving him alive for much longer. This is a problem for David. It's a nightmare.

We won't find out how it's resolved until next week. Because, at this point, the story switches abruptly from David to Saul. We're left with a cliff-hanger.

But for now, it's worth asking how David ended up in this position. How did he get himself caught in such a terrible trap?

And to answer that, we need to go back to the opening verse of the chapter.

Flick back over the page with me and see what it says. How does David end up in such a predicament? I don't think it's overstating the case to say that it's because of the first five words: **But David thought to himself...**

We all know the old joke. Someone says, 'I've been thinking...' And immediately, someone else pipes up, 'That'll get you in trouble, that will!'

In David's case, it did.

Now, it's easy to criticise someone from a safe distance. It might be different if we were standing in his shoes. But it certainly seems as though he's depending on the Philistines rather than God at this point.

We can understand the pressure he's under. He and his men must have been physically and mentally exhausted after Saul's relentless pursuit of them. He must have been demoralised after being betrayed to Saul by his own people, the Ziphites, not once but twice. On top of that, he and his men had their wives and families with them. They had a responsibility to provide for them and protect them. That's a lot of responsibility. The land of the Philistines

must surely have looked very attractive. Once they were there, they could finally relax in safety. On the face of it, this must have looked like a good decision.

Yet even before we get to the end, there are clues that it's not such a good decision. The fact that David engages in wholesale slaughter just to cover his tracks isn't commented on. But we can feel the narrator's displeasure as he tells us about it. And the lessons that David's been learning seem to have been completely forgotten. He thinks to himself, or more literally, he said to his heart, **'One of these days I shall be destroyed by the hand of Saul.'**

David is talking to himself. And what he tells himself determines his action. 'It's hopeless,' he says. 'There's no way out.' 'Nothing can be done.' And he tells himself that it's just a matter of time before Saul kills him. The things he'd just experienced in the wilderness – with Saul in the cave, with Nabal, sneaking in and out of Saul's camp untouched. And the things he'd experienced before that – escaping from Saul's grasp with the help of Jonathan and Michal. All these things should have taught him that God is more than capable of protecting him. Even from Saul. Even in Israel.

But instead, he preaches the opposite to himself. He tells himself that if he stays in Israel, Saul is surely going to destroy him. And once again, he takes matters into his own hands. **'The best thing I can do,'** he says, **'is...'**

And we want to finish that sentence for him. We want to shout out, 'The best thing you can do is trust God, David!' But he finishes it differently. **'The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines.'**

What a slow learner! After all he's been through! But isn't that just like *us*?

How many times do I have to keep making the same mistakes and learning the same lessons before they eventually sink in?

And the *big* mistake David's making is that he isn't careful about what he tells himself.

We all talk to ourselves. It's *not* the first sign of madness. It's quite normal. We do it all the time, telling ourselves that this is true or that is true. This is false or that is false. And what we tell ourselves is powerful. It determines our actions.

But it's not as though David didn't have a clear word from God to rely on.

The prophet Samuel had anointed him with oil and declared him to be God's chosen king. Saul's son, Jonathan, had repeated that promise to him. **'You shall be king over Israel,'** he said. (23:17) Saul himself had confirmed the promise. **'I know that you will surely be king,'** he said, **'and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands.'** (24:20) Even Nabal's wife, Abigail, had confirmed it. **'The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord...'** she said. And she went on, **'Even though someone is pursuing you**

to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God...' (25:28-29)

He's been told it again and again. But David says to himself, 'It's no good... **One of these days I shall be destroyed by the hand of Saul.'**

We need to be so careful what we tell ourselves. And we need to learn to preach God's word to ourselves. We all tell ourselves things that are not true, especially when we're fearful. When we're under pressure, we say to ourselves, 'The best thing I can do is...' And then we take matters into our own hands, leaving God out of the picture. But we have God's promises to stand on. And God's word is clear. It will correct our wrong thinking, if only we will read it and meditate on it and listen to it.

That's what David failed to do. And as a result, he finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. Like us so often, he finds himself in trouble of his own making. And that's where the story leaves him.

As I said earlier, we'll have to wait until next week to find out what happens. If this was made into a movie, it would be at this point that the director shouts, 'Cut!'.

And now, the story switches angles. Now we go from David in the camp of the Philistines to Saul in the camp of the Israelites. And I've called our next heading: Saul's desperation.

Saul's desperation

Now we're on the opposite side of the battlefield. And we're told in verse 5 of chapter 28 that, **When Saul saw the Philistines, he was afraid; terror filled his heart.**

And it would do. The Philistines were a fearsome enemy.

In his terror Saul enquires of God. But God doesn't answer him. Saul has a long track record of failing to obey God's words, so God has rejected him. God has nothing more to say to him. If we repeatedly close our ears to God's words, we can't complain if God stops speaking. But it's a desperate situation to be in. Saul is totally alone, without God, and without hope.

And in his desperation, he longs to speak with Samuel once again. But Samuel's dead. So, he asks his men to find him a medium.

Conveniently, even though Saul had expelled all the mediums from Israel, his men know precisely where to find one. So, Saul goes to her. And after reassuring her that she isn't getting into trouble, he asks her to bring up Samuel. Which she does.

When Samuel appears, the woman's reaction is shock. She cries out. Perhaps this is the first time her jiggery pokery has worked! She's as surprised as anyone.

It's all very unusual. The Bible is clear that the dead do not speak. Yet, on this occasion, it seems that this really is Samuel. It suggests that this is a rare occasion, a bit like the appearance of Moses and Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration, when God does allow someone to appear from the dead. But his message certainly isn't what Saul wanted to hear. These aren't words of comfort.

Saul thinks the Philistines are a fearsome enemy. But Samuel tells him that he's got a bigger problem than the Philistines. The Lord is his enemy. And tomorrow, Samuel says, Saul and his sons will join him in the grave.

Then we're told in verse 20: **Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night.**

His men convince him to accept a meal from the woman, which she prepares. It's a lavish meal. Possibly the last one he would eat. And we're told, in verse 25: **Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate.** And then it says: **That same night they got up and left.**

As we read that we might recall another last supper. And we may remember how that one ended too. In John 13, verses 30, it says: **As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out.** And then John adds: **And it was night.**

Both men go out into the darkness of night. And that has great significance.

To be in darkness is to be utterly forsaken by God.

Saul knew himself to be forsaken by God. All that remained for him was judgement and death. And he was terrified. He fell to the ground overcome with fear.

And we should be terrified too. Because, by nature, we're in the same boat as Saul. By nature, we're all deserving of God's wrath. We all face his coming judgement and death.

But that's why Christ came. This is why the Christian message is such good news. In a few weeks' time we'll be celebrating Easter. And the message of Easter is that, at the cross, Jesus experienced the darkness of God-forsakenness for us, in our place, so that we will never have to, if we trust in him.

In Mark's Gospel, as Mark describes Jesus' death, he tells us this.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'). (Mark 15:33-34)

We can hear the echo of Saul's words in his: **'God has departed from me. He no longer answers me.'**

At the cross, Jesus entered the darkness of God-forsakenness in our place. He bore the judgement for our sin in our stead. He took the punishment we deserve for our disobedience to God. And when *he* rose from the dead, he didn't speak words of judgement but words of peace. **'Peace be with you!'** he said. (John 20:19)

Jesus was forsaken by God so that we might have peace with God and live each day not in the shadow of death but in the light of life.

The question we *must* ask ourselves is whether we have come to him as our King and Saviour, to rescue us from the darkness we deserve and to bring us back into right relationship with God. Are we listening to him, and trusting him, and obeying him?

Conclusion

So here, then, we have two men.

One is on the horns of a dilemma because he preached to himself rather than listening to the words of God.

The other is facing the darkness of God's judgement because of his persistent refusal to *obey* the words of God.

And we're going to have to wait until next week to finish *their* stories and our sermon series in 1 Samuel.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the cross of Jesus. Thank you that he was forsaken by you so that we may never be. Please help us all to trust in his cross, to listen to his words, and to live our lives in the light of them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.