

Chapter 4

David - the Guerilla Period

For reading: 1 Samuel chapters 23, 24 and 25. It seems like a lot to take in, so the narrative below has the relevant chapters identified. It may be a good idea to re-read each chapter as you progress to the study material.

I have called this period in David's life the "guerilla Period" – it could also be called the "Hide-and-Seek" time.

Chapter 23:

David had by now attracted some 600 men as followers (1 Sam 23:13). They comprised a homeless band, seemingly without purpose other than to get away from Saul. When David received word that the Philistines were attacking a Judean town (Keilah) he decided to offer help and protection. His men were not of the same mind, though. David "enquired of the Lord" – twice. (verses 2, 4). The rescue mission to Keilah was a success, and David and his band found rest in Keilah.

That did not last long, as Saul got wind of where David was hiding. As he approached the city, David realised that the threat of Saul and his army outweighed any gratitude the people of Keilah might have felt towards him and his men. It was time to move on.

For pause and reflection: One could imagine that David and his men were extremely disappointed with the betrayal of the people of Keilah. They had responded to a dire need, successfully removed the threat and yet found themselves betrayed and, in essence, being portrayed as the wrong doers. Yet – we read of no recrimination from David and his followers with respect to this betrayal.

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Where you tried to help or support someone, and then to be accused of interference or some other negative sentiment?

How did you react to that? Why do you think David could simply "move on" after being betrayed?

In the desert of Ziph David and his men found shelter of sorts. Today the ruins of Tell Ziph (about 6 km south-south-east of Hebron) can be visited, The hill summit is 2882 ft above sea level – thus providing a commanding view over the surrounding countryside. There are remains of cisterns and evidence of fortifications. David's men would thus have been able to track Saul's movements and by moving regularly, they evaded Saul successfully. Jonathan seems to have had some inside information, because he caught up with David for a secret meeting (1 Sam 23:16-18). During this meeting Jonathan confirmed that he, and his father, knew that David would be the next king.

The local population betrayed David's whereabouts to Saul, and the band moved further south, to the area around Maon, directly to the south and about 6km further into the wilderness. Saul followed, and nearly had David trapped on one of the mountains or against a deep gorge. 1 Sam 23:28 identifies the location as Sela Hammahlekoth. The name is translated either as "cliff of divisions" or "cliff of escapes". It is associated with Wadi Malaky, a deep gorge between Hachilah and Maon.

An attack by the Philistines on Israel itself saved David – Saul had to give up the chase to defend against the invasion.

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Chapter 24:

Not that the respite lasted long. As soon as the Philistine threat had been averted, Saul was back on David's trail. David had, in the meantime, moved further south and east, to the desert of En Gedi and Saul was advised of this.

En Gedi, or to give it its current name Ein Gedi, is an oasis on the west shore of the Dead Sea. A strong spring system produces fresh water from the high cliffs and archeological digs show evidence of settlements dating back to the 4th century BC.

The entire chapter is devoted to the first incident of David sparing Saul's life.

David and his men were hiding in the cave system on the west side of the Dead Sea, and Saul and his band had been tracking them. Saul needed to relieve himself and went into the same cave where David was hiding.

This presented an ideal opportunity for David to eliminate his arch-enemy and his men encouraged him to do so. David, however, only went close enough to Saul to cut off a piece of his cloak and refused to commit murder.

After Saul had left the cave, David confronted him with the evidence of his close encounter, and Saul acknowledged David as the next king and called off the hunt.

The Apostle Paul wrote several centuries after David that "all Scripture is ... useful for teaching .. and training." (2 Tim 3:16, 17). So what can we learn from this chapter?

In the history narrative of David's life there are a few shining examples of ethical, righteous behaviour – and, as we shall see in the next chapter, also some examples of the opposite. In chapter 23 we encounter one of the examples of how David lived up to the words of 1 Sam 13:14 – a man after God's own heart.

Consider the situation: David had been at the peak of a splendid career – son-in-law to the king, one of the chosen warriors (even captain of the king's bodyguard as we find in 1 Sam 22:14). In other words, he was on a roll, as we would say in modern language.

Then, due to Saul's jealousy, this all changed in a flash. David lost his wife, his position, his career – everything. He was now an outcast. Even the people he helped betrayed him, like the people of Keilah and Ziph (1 Sam 23).

David must have felt some bitterness towards the man who had taken everything from him.

For pause and reflection: We may also have experienced a situation where we suffered loss due to the unethical behaviour of another. Betrayal on a personal relationship level, maybe on a professional/business level could place us (metaphorically speaking) in a similar situation as David – having lost something or someone we hold dear due to the actions of someone we may even have trusted unreservedly.

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Our reaction to such a situation reveals much about our own relationship with God.

How would you see yourself measuring up against David in the cave of En Gedi?

And here, in the dark of a cave near En Gedi, David had the opportunity to take revenge. His men even pointed out that this could be seen as God's way of putting Saul in David's hands (1 Sam 24:4).

And yet – David responded to this temptation by refusing to lift his hand against Saul. Verse 5 is an eloquent statement of leaving matters in God's hands, not messing with God's plans. Linked to verse 15, we see David putting the matter squarely in God's hands.

In this episode we catch a glimpse of "the man after God's own heart".

For pause and reflection: David knew by now that he was the anointed man to take over the kingdom from Saul. How that would play out he did not know – but he was not prepared to take the matter in his own hands and kill Saul. He was prepared to let God's plan develop in God's own time.

In our present pandemic situation, we may be getting short on patience, waiting for this to get better. We may even lament, like Habakkuk, "how long, oh Lord, must I call for help and You do not listen"? (Hab 1:2).

Taking an example from David to patiently wait on the Lord may not be easy, but it is rewarding when we leave the future to Him who was, and is, and will be forever.

Chapter 25:

This chapter could be the plot for a movie, combining some action with a love story.

David and his men had moved back west from En Gedi into the wilderness of Maon. Maon supported a thriving pastoral community. The semi-desert landscape is still used today as a grazing area for sheep and goats.

David and his band appear to have developed a strategy to protect the people and property of the Judeans (verse 7, 15). This behaviour will feature later in the history as well. By protecting the people and their property David would have gained support among the local populations of the areas in which the band had to hide.

For pause and reflection: This practice, of protecting the goods and lives of those who lived in the area, without being asked to do so and without expectation of remuneration could be stretched into an example of voluntary service. Today we would not protect other people's sheep and goats as a service, but we can serve in other currently relevant ways. Simple actions, like contacting someone who may be lonely, offering to do grocery shopping for someone, or whatever.

Think of ways in which you can be a "David and his warrior band" to someone today.

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Nabal is identified as a large stockholder. Fielding 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats would probably have put him into the “1% demographic” of the time.

Sheepshearing appears to have been a festive event – and shearing 3,000 sheep by hand would have taken several days, maybe several weeks. David sent a delegation to Nabal to request that he should include David and his men in the festivities, seeing they were the ones who kept his flocks safe while they were grazing in the Carmel region. In a sense it was a request for recognition.

Nabal’s reaction was that of a selfish and arrogant person. Instead of showing gratitude, he insulted David as one who “[broke] away from his master” (verses 10, 11).

When his men reported back, David’s response was not as magnanimous as it had been when the people of Keilah and Ziph showed similar ingratitude for his help (Chapter 23). He reacted in anger and swore terrible retribution on Nabal and his entire household – all males were at risk of being killed (verse 13, 21 and 22). To put it mildly – David was miffed!

For pause and reflection: When we reach out a helping hand to others, we, too, sometimes get rebuffed. Sometimes actively – “don’t bother me” – and sometimes the other person simply accepts our help and neglects to say “thank you” or recognize our help in any way.

Has this happened to you? Did you react like David?

Nabal’s mistreatment of David’s delegation was reported to Nabal’s wife Abigail. She is described as “intelligent and beautiful” (verse 3), and she obviously realised that Nabal’s arrogance was likely to cost him and the entire household dearly. She collected a large amount of food – fit for a feast – as described in verse 18. Bread, sheep, roasted grain, raisin cakes, fig cakes and wine. The quantities mentioned would have been sufficient to feed about 400 people, the number of men on their way to annihilate Nabal and his household. Abigail and David ran into each other in a ravine and Abigail’s eloquent address in verses 24 to 31 was enough to cool David’s rage.

For pause and reflection: Abigail managed to prevent David from shedding innocent blood in a fit of rage. She expressed concern for his integrity in view of his later role as king (verse 28). This incident is reflected somewhat in Proverbs 15:1 and in Ephesians 4:26.

Think about times in your own life when you may have been prevented from acting in anger by someone else - your own “Abigail”. Have you been in the position of being an “Abigail” to someone else?

Abigail waited until her husband woke up after the feast where he had gotten “very drunk” (verse 36). One can imagine that he was quite hung over the next morning when she eventually told him what she had done. He suffered what appears to have been a stroke and died ten days later.

The story ends with Abigail becoming David’s wife. Just as a side note – eventually David would end up with eight wives (1 Chronicles 3:1-9).

End of this set of notes