DAVID SPARES SAUL’S LIFE -- AGAIN

In our study of First Samuel we have noted that there is a stark contrast between two kings of Israel, both the Lord’s anointed, Saul and David, from Chapter 16 onward. King Saul is the reigning king and David is the king in waiting, the future king, the man that God chose and is preparing to be king. So, what are some of the differences between them? [David has the Holy Spirit upon him, David listened to the voice of reason when wronged and did not act as avenger, David’s reverence for the Lord’s anointed king, prophets and priests, David’s seeking of God’s guidance, David’s obedience to the Lord, David’s leadership and respect he earned from his men, David’s heroism and bravery]

Back in Chapter 24 David spared Saul’s life in the cave. The Lord gave Saul into David’s hand…David had the opportunity to kill Saul and was even urged by his own men to do it. But David exercised restraint. He knew to kill Saul, the Lord’s anointed, would be a sin. So, David made the righteous choice NOT to take Saul’s life. He told Saul, “Far be it from me because of the Lord that I should do to this thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the Lord’s anointed…May the Lord judge between you and me, and may the Lord avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you.” In other words, “King Saul, the Lord God will be the Avenger of any wrongdoing, not me.” Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” That lesson was underscored in Chapter 25, David’s experience with foolish Nabal. Nabal wronged David and disrespected him; David became upset; he went after Nabal to kill him and his household; God intervened and raised up Abigail; David heeded Abigail’s wise words to him. David restrained himself from wrath and did not go after Nabal. In the end it was God who struck down Nabal, and not David. David recognized that God is sovereign. He is in control. God is the Avenger and will deal with the wrongdoer.

Which brings us to today’s lesson in 1 Samuel Chapter 26. In a lot of ways what happens here in Chapter 26 is a repeat of history, a replay of what happened between David and Saul back in Chapter 24. There are some differences in the details, yes (I will point those out), but the lessons learned from these two separate events are essentially the same – The Lord God is the Avenger of evil and not us. Which begs the obvious question: “Why would God repeat the same basic lesson involving the same two main characters David and Saul?” Well, let’s delve into the text and find out.

READ 1 Samuel 26:1-4.

The Ziphites are inhabitants of the town of Ziph which sits on the edge of the wilderness of Ziph (this is the rugged wilderness that is located on the west side of the Dead Sea). I like to refer to the Ziphites as “Saul’s royal snitches.” Our story here starts out the same way as the story in Chapter 24 started. What prompted Saul go after David back in Chapter 24? These same Ziphites snitched on David. 1 Sam 23:19-20 says, “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? 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.’” The Ziphites being loyal subjects of King Saul offered to help deliver David, whom Saul perceived to be his enemy, over to the king. David was a wanted man and the Ziphites were after the reward.

The passage here tells us that Saul arose and went after David in the wilderness of Ziph with 3000 chosen men of Israel. Now, why is Saul going after David? I mean at the end of Chapter 24 Saul saw that David had spared his life and said to David: “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. 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. 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. And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand” (1 Sam 24:17-20). At that point Saul and David went their separate ways in peace. So why then is Saul pursuing David yet again? Because Saul is a fool. He hasn’t learned anything from his experience in Chapter 24 or he has forgotten it. The truth is that David is NOT Saul’s enemy. He proved this to Saul in Chapter 24 and Saul acknowledged it. But here we see Saul repeating the error of his ways and pursuing David, presumably to kill him. Why else would Saul ride out from the comforts of his palace at Gibeah into the wilderness with 3000 men? Back in Chapter 23 we’re told, “David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life” (v 15). So really, nothing’s changed. David had a brief respite from Saul, but here comes Saul after him once again.

READ 1 Samuel 26:5.

Here we are told one big difference between the story in Chapter 24 and this one. In Chapter 24 David and his men were hiding in a cave and Saul happened upon them seemingly by chance (of course if you believe in the sovereignty of God as I do then nothing happens merely by chance). But here in Chapter 26 David deliberately goes down toward the camp of Saul. For the longest time David has been the hunted and Saul the hunter. Now David goes out to spy on Saul and then goes to where Saul is. It says here that David “came to the place where Saul had encamped.” David sneaks up on Saul and gets close enough to where he can see Saul in the middle of the camp.

READ 1 Samuel 26:6-8

Another difference between Chapter 24’s account and this one is that in Chapter 24 the men of David (plural and unnamed) urged David to kill Saul. Here Abishai (the lone guy with David) says, “Please, let me take him out for you…let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear!” Such bravado! By the way, a side note about this guy Abishai – he is named in 1 Chronicles 11 as one of David’s Mighty Men. Of the 30 mentioned by name Abishai is the fourth most prominent. We are told that “he wielded his spear against 300 men and killed them.” So he knew how to handle a spear!

READ 1 Samuel 26:9-12

In both Chapter 24 and here David’s response is basically the same: “Saul is the Lord’s anointed so to put out one’s hand against him (to kill him) would be a sin before God…The Lord forbid that I should put out my hand against the Lord’s anointed.” Instead David and Abishai take Saul’s spear and water jar and leave the camp. Some commentaries I read tried to read in some sort of spiritual significance to these items (i.e., the spear represented Saul’s power, etc). That’s all interesting but merely human conjecture. The fact is that the scripture never actually says any of that. I personally believe David took these two items, which belonged to Saul, as proof that David had Saul’s life in his hand and nothing more than that. They were simply there for the taking.

I love what David says to Abishai in verse 10. It shows that David learned the lesson from Chapter 25 that God is the Avenger and not him. He basically tells Abishai that God will deal with Saul in the manner He chooses and in His own time. Later in Chapter 31 Saul will, in fact, lose his life on the battlefield. We will look at that next week.

We’re told here that it was **the Lord** who gave Saul into David’s hand. Verse 12 says, “For they [speaking of Saul and his 3000 men] were all asleep, because a deep sleep **from the Lord** had fallen upon them”… Divine intervention. God’s hand was directly involved in this situation. God was protecting David and Abishai. Certainly either David or Abishai had the opportunity to kill Saul. But once again, just like back in Chapter 24, David spares Saul’s life. And at the time Saul wasn’t even aware of it.

I’m sure old King Saul must have felt pretty safe and secure as he bedded down for the night in the middle of his camp surrounded by 3000 of his soldiers. But Saul, in fact, wasn’t safe at all. The truth is that no matter how safe we think we might be, no matter what precautions we take to protect ourselves, God can still reach us and do to us whatever He wills. God could have had Saul killed that night if He wanted to, but it wasn’t His time. You can’t run and hide from God.

As I studied Chapter 26 the reason why God repeated the lessons of Chapter 24 became clearer. It wasn’t so much for David’s benefit, though it did reinforce those lessons he had learned before. No, I saw it as mostly for Saul’s benefit. Saul is the Lord’s anointed. And even though he has rebelled against God and wandered far away from Him I could see God’s grace trying to break through Saul’s crusty old heart. To the very end I see God in His sovereign grace trying to get Saul to repent and turn back to Him.

READ 1 Samuel 26:13-16.

Notice that in this account when David is a safe distance away and calls out, he initially addresses Abner rather than Saul. Remember, it is still night time so they cannot see David, but they can hear his voice. David chides Abner for not protecting his king. In the Chapter 24 account it is daylight when David calls out to Saul from the opening of the cave and Saul turns around and sees David. Just another differences between the two events. But Saul does recognize David’s voice even if he can’t see him…

READ 1 Samuel 26:17-20.

David asks Saul why he’s pursuing him. In the Chapter 24 account David didn’t have to ask Saul why he was pursuing him. He knew that Saul thought David was his enemy and was paranoid thinking David wanted to kill him and take his throne. Well, in Chapter 24 David proved to Saul that this was not the case at all and Saul had acknowledged that he was wrong for pursuing David and stopped chasing him. So why then is Saul pursuing after David again? David offers up two possibilities: (1) David has sinned before God and Saul is the Lord’s instrument of judgment against David. If this is the case then David announces his willingness to offer a sacrifice for the atonement of his sin; (2) Evil men, whoever they are (Saul surrounded himself with a number of them), have stirred Saul up against David. If this is the case, then they need to be judged, “cursed before the Lord” for misleading the king.

David blows off a little steam at this point and airs some of his frustration. He explains that there is a spiritual downside to his having been chased all over the place. For years now this has kept David from being able to worship God among his own people the way he should. Alos, being on the run has forced David to live among pagans (like the Philistines). David asks Saul, in essence, “Why are you spending so much of your valuable time and resources pursuing after me. You have better things, more important things to do.”

Well this elicits a response from King Saul…

READ 1 Samuel 26:21.

Saul acknowledges that he has sinned. This is the first time that Saul has done this since back in Chapter 15 when Samuel confronted Saul about his disobedience in not destroying the Amalekites. Saul confesses his sin, but he stops short of full repentance. The most significant thing that Saul says in this verse is “I have acted foolishly…” Saul is exactly right! He’s been a fool. Remember in Chapter 25 Abigail in her message to David said, “Let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be as Nabal” (1 Sam 25:26). In other words, “May all your enemies be insignificant fools just like my husband Nabal.” And here, one chapter later, Saul admits with his own mouth that he’s been a fool. I don’t think that’s a coincidence. It further contrasts Saul’s character – sinful and foolish – with David’s character – good, obedient and discerning. By the way, in next week’s lesson we will see that Saul is not finished playing the fool as he does something very foolish.

READ 1 Samuel 26:22-24.

David repeats the same point that he made to Saul back in Chapter 24. “The Lord gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the Lord’s anointed.” It’s the same message God had spoken to Saul but which Saul has apparently forgotten. By the way that’s one characteristic of a fool – failure to learn lessons from past experiences. So, through David, God sends the same message to Saul a second time. This time apparently Saul gets it because after this he will no longer pursues David.

READ 1 Samuel 26:25.

Saul and David and their men again part ways peacefully. David trusts God but he doesn’t trust Saul and for good reason. So it is that David goes his way (he apparently heads west to Gath in Philistia) and Saul returns to his place to the north in Gibeah. Chapter 27 begins with these unfortunate words, “Then David said in his heart…” This is what will get David into trouble. As it turns out David should never have left Israel. But we’ll talk more about that next week.

Application for us from today’s lesson: Do we as Christians have the patience and restraint that David showed? Do we trust that God will handle those who wrong us and that we don’t need to avenge ourselves? Do we really believe that God is sovereign, in control and will handle things His way and in His time? Do we extend mercy and allow God be the Avenger of wrongdoing? Just when we think we’ve learned the lessons that God wants us to learn, He puts what we think we’ve learned to the test. That’s what God does with David in the next few Chapters, which we will look at next week as we wrap up our study of First Samuel.