

THE LORD DELIVERS SAUL INTO DAVID'S HAND¹

INTRODUCTION

Fray Luis de León was a Roman Catholic scholar of the 16th century – a professor teaching Theology at the University of Salamanca in Spain. In one of his lectures, Fray Luis had the temerity to suggest that the Latin vulgate, translated by Jerome in the early 5th century and the official translation used by the Roman Catholic Church, wasn't inspired and that the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible alone were accurate. He did this in the knowledge that a few decades earlier the Roman Catholic Council of Trent had declared that the Vulgate was to be accepted as authoritative in all public lectures, preaching and exposition. For his trouble, he was denounced before the Spanish Inquisition, and imprisoned – incarcerated – for almost five years – four years, eight months and nineteen days to be precise. On his release, he was warmly received back at his university and restored to his professorship. There is a strong tradition that he began his first public lecture with the words, 'As we were saying...' – words to be seen to this day on a plaque outside the wall of his classroom in Salamanca. You have to admire the man's courage and convictions – even if you have to question his tact.

I know it isn't almost five years since we were last together – but this evening we continue from where we left off twelve months ago. And so, 'As we were saying ...'. For, as you will have noticed from our reading, chapter 24 begins where chapter 23 ends.

As we will see, to no small extent, chapters 24 and 26 are mirror images of each other. Both chapters open with Saul receiving a report about David's latest hiding place, 24. 1; 26. 1. Both chapters focus on David's refusal to 'stretch out' his 'hand' against Saul – who he views throughout as 'the Lord's anointed', 24. 6, 10; 26. 11. And both chapters conclude with words of remorse from Saul – introduced by his words, 'Is that your voice, my son David?' – and with Saul's subsequent return home – leaving off, temporarily – his pursuit of David, 24. 16-22; 26. 17, 21, 25.²

In terms of the structure of this section of 1 Samuel, chapters 24 and 26 form bookends around the central chapter 25, in which Nabal, the ill-natured sheep-farmer, functions as a kind of 'double' for Saul, the rejected king.³ The two men have much in common. For example, Nabal' is known to all, including his own wife, as a 'fool', 25. 25, while Saul confesses himself to have 'played (acted) the fool', 26. 21. Nabal, we are told, feasted 'like a king', 25. 36, while Saul, of course, was a king. Both men are said to have rewarded (requited) David 'evil for good', 24. 17; 25. 21 – against the background of there being no 'evil' in David or in his hand, 24. 11; 25. 28; 26. 18. And in each case, David looked to God to 'plead his cause' against the man who set himself against him, 24. 15; 25. 39.

The common thread running through these three related episodes is that of David's self-control – his willingness to spare the lives of others while he waited for God's time and God's intervention on his behalf. And one outcome from David's restraint under enormous provocation throughout was that he could later reign with a clear conscience – having had no hand in the death either of Saul or of Nabal.

CHAPTER DIVISION

It is striking that each of the principal characters in the chapter draw attention to the fact that 'the Lord' had 'delivered' Saul into David's 'hand'.

In *the opening section*, vv. 1-7, the words are found on the lips of *David's men*, v. 4. In *the central section*, vv. 8-15, the words are found on the lips of *David himself*, v. 10. And in *the closing section*, vv. 16-22, the words are found on the lips of *king Saul*, v. 18.

Verses 1-7	To cut off a head – or a hem?
Verses 8-15	David makes his case – with the use of a visual aid
Verses 16-22	Saul's response :
	(i) His remorse, vv. 16-19
	(ii) His recognition, v. 20
	(iii) His request, vv. 21-22

EXPOSITION

Verses 1-7 **To cut off a head – or a hem?**

Verse 1. 'When Saul was returned from following the Philistines'. Chapter 24 begins where chapter 23 ends.⁴ In the previous chapter, God had intervened dramatically to deliver David from Saul by compelling the king to withdraw from David to fight the Philistines just at the moment when his net was closing in on David. We are not told explicitly

how Saul fared, but our verse – ‘returned from after the Philistines’ (literally) – suggests that, on this occasion, he had been successful in seeing off the invading Philistines.⁵ That done, he now continued his hunt for David.

‘David is in the wilderness of En-gedi’. Saul was informed of what we knew from the end of chapter 23, namely that David had left the wilderness of Maon for En-gedi - some six or seven hours march away on the western shore of the Dead Sea. En-gedi means ‘the Spring of the Young Goat’ because, although surrounded by barren, desolate territory, En-gedi itself was an oasis, served by a constant and unfailing spring located several hundred feet up a large cliff. The area immediately around was covered with palm-trees – hence its former name of Hazazon-tamar – ‘the Cutting of the Palm-trees’, 2 Chron. 20. 2, and, adorned with many waterfalls, its slopes boasted some of the choicest vineyards of Judaea, scented with camphire⁶ – a small white and yellow flower used even in ancient days for the manufacture of perfume. I note that the maiden in the Song of Solomon says in chapter 1, ‘My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi’, v. 14. In many ways, therefore, En-gedi was far more like a tropical paradise than it was the middle of a desert.

Verse 2. *‘Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel’.* These 3,000 were Saul’s standing army, first pulled together back at the beginning of chapter 13, where we read that ‘Saul chose him three thousand men of Israel’, 13. 2; cf. 26. 2. Clearly Saul was taking no chances and brought the whole of his standing army with him in quest of David – giving him a five-to-one advantage over David, who had with him only ‘about 600’ men, 23. 13.

‘The rocks of the wild goats’. Bare limestone cliffs and hills towered some two hundred to four hundred feet high above the plain and these were dotted with numerous large caves, the entrances to some of which were very difficult to reach. This was the area known as ‘the rocks of the wild goats’.

Verse 3. *‘He came to the sheepcotes by the way, where was a cave: and Saul went in to cover his feet’.* Having reached En-gedi, Saul felt the call of nature and looked about for a convenient loo stop – a rest room where he could attend to his personal needs. All very unexceptional so far but then the Holy Spirit springs His surprise.

‘And David and his men remained in the sides of the cave’. The word translated ‘in the sides of’ is used to describe the depths of the ship where Jonah lay and slept in Jonah 1.5. Here it describes the deepest recesses – the inner recesses – of the very cave in which David had sought safety from the king. At the time, it must have struck David as the ideal hide-out for him and his men! In the middle of a barren desert, but with plenty of water and wildlife, with many caves and defensive positions, an elevated position from which David’s scouts could easily detect approaching troops – En-gedi was a natural ‘stronghold’ (‘fortress’), 23. 29. Good choice, David – or maybe not! For, if the constraint of Saul’s envy had brought him to En-gedi, the call of nature now brought him to David’s cave.

It is possible that it was while David was hiding in this particular cave that he wrote Psalm 57 (headed ‘When he fled from Saul in the cave’) and/or Psalm 142 (headed ‘When he was in the cave’). For what it is worth, I believe that it is likely that David wrote both psalms in the cave of Adullam back in chapter 22.⁷ But, *if they were written at En-gedi*, they give us an insight into David’s feelings at the time, and express his total trust *in the Lord*, not in the cave, as his true ‘refuge’; ‘Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul *trusteth in thee*: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast’, Psa. 57.1; ‘I cried unto thee, O Lord: I said, *Thou art my refuge*’, Psa. 142.5. Certainly, at this juncture – as David and his men saw Saul approaching nearer and nearer – their cave could hardly have seemed that safe a refuge!

For in this very *serious* game of ‘hide and seek’, Saul was now far closer to David than at any time since the beginning of his search. He wasn’t just ‘warm’ or ‘hot’ – he was ‘very, very hot’! But he didn’t know it! In the closing section of chapter 23, Saul had come within an hair’s breadth of trapping David – and he knew it, 23. 26. But then, thanks to the providential Philistine attack, he failed to actually ensnare him. Now in the opening section of chapter 24, he succeeded in completely enclosing him – but was wholly unaware of it.

In the circumstances, Saul would of course have entered the cave alone – with his personal bodyguards remaining at a discreet distance outside the cave to wait for him.

Saul’s purpose in going into the cave, we are told, was to ‘cover his feet’. This is just one of several euphemisms used in scripture for relieving oneself. We find such expressions also, for example, as to ‘go out’ to a place outside the camp, and to ‘sit down outside’, Deut. 23. 12-13 lit.

But it is possible that the Holy Spirit chose to use this particular expression here to suggest a link between this incident and one which had taken place over 200 years before – which also concerned a king who was thought to have ‘covered his feet’ – which concerned a king indeed who had come from *directly* across the Dead Sea from En-gedi, from the land of Moab. For Judges 3 says of Eglon king of Moab, then at his base in Jericho, that ‘he was sitting in a summer parlour, which he had for himself alone’, and where his servants assumed he ‘covered his feet’, Judg. 3. 20-24. And it had been there that Eglon had been slain by Ehud, the left-handed deliverer/judge. And now another king seeks a place of privacy where he can ‘cover his feet’ – as oblivious as Eglon had been to the fact that he was in mortal danger. And, if David had not had his strong convictions about the sacredness of Saul’s person as ‘the Lord’s anointed’, there would have been another king dead while his servants stood around outside, thinking that he ‘was covering his feet’! I guess that David would not have found it so easy to escape as had Ehud!

I imagine David’s men, crouched low at the back of the cave, peering out and watching Saul and his 3,000 troops as they drew nearer and nearer – and then stop – right outside the mouth of their cave! I can almost feel the tension as Saul’s eyes – and then feet – turned toward the cave. At that point David’s men had no way of knowing, of course, what was in Saul’s mind. I guess their knuckles turned white around their weapons. What happened next must have been as great a relief to David and his men as doubtless it was to Saul – and completely changed the attitude of David’s men to Saul’s arrival – from viewing it as a dreadful disaster they came to see it as a most wonderful and happy providence.

Verse 4. *‘The men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee ...’.* David’s men could neither believe their eyes nor that Saul’s entrance *alone* into *their* cave was any coincidence or accident. Speaking

of accidents reminds me of what I read some time ago about a cowboy who applied for an insurance policy. When the insurance agent asked him, 'Have you ever had any accidents?', he answered, 'Nope. Only pains I've had were when a horse kicked in two of my ribs last summer, and when a rattlesnake bit me on the ankle a couple of years ago'. The agent queried, 'Wouldn't you call those accidents?' 'Nope', the cowboy responded, 'they did it on purpose!' And I have to agree with the cowboy that, in one sense, no things which happen to us are 'accidents' – but for an entirely different reason. I share the viewpoint of David's men to this extent – that ultimately God is in control of all events and 'happenings'. But the big question which always faces us – as it then faced David and his men – is how we are meant to interpret those 'happenings' which He allows into our lives.

There can be no question but that Saul's vulnerable position was a classic case of God's providence at work. To David's men, this was David's God-given opportunity to eliminate his 'enemy' – which was how they viewed Saul. It had not been that long since Saul had said of David at Keilah that 'God hath delivered him into *mine hand*; for he is shut in, by entering into a town that hath gates and bars', 23. 7 – but Saul had then been proven wrong. God had certainly *not* 'delivered David into his hand', and David had escaped Saul's clutches. But now, as David's men were quick to interpret events, God *had* delivered *Saul* into *David's hands* – and that without the help of gates and bars! In their reckoning this was an opportunity far too good to miss.

I can't help wondering if any of David's men gave a moment's thought to how they would have escaped if they had assassinated the king. For, had they done so, they would have been trapped inside the cave, with Saul's standing army of 3,000 men parked outside. It would have only been a matter of time before Abner or another of Saul's leading men would have ventured, as once had the servants of Eglon, to intrude on the king's privacy to check that all was well.

Perhaps David's men imagined that, when Saul's servants discovered 'their lord fallen down dead on the earth' – as had Eglon's servants had found him, Judg. 3. 25 – Saul's standing army would simply have scattered? Or that Saul's troops would have immediately and readily acclaimed David as the new king of Israel. Frankly, neither scenario strikes me as at all likely. I suspect that David's men didn't even stop to consider the outcome of their implied proposal.

The Septuagint renders their opening words, 'Behold, *this (is) the day* of which the Lord spoke' – 'this is the day' being the exact expression found also in the Septuagint of Psa. 118.24 – 'This is the day which the Lord has made'. I can almost hear them quietly humming the tune of the chorus based on that verse, 'This is the day, this is the day, that the Lord hath made...!'

'Look, David', they are saying, 'this is the day the Lord told you about when He said, "I am giving your enemy into your hand and you shall do to him as you wish". If you can't see that, David, you must be blind. Recently God miraculously and providentially delivered *you* out of *Saul's* hand (23. 27); now He has equally miraculously and providentially delivered *him* into *yours*! Your enemy has taken the opportunity to make our cave into a rest room – let's not miss the opportunity to make it into a 'Rest in Peace' room!'

'Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee'. Scripture tells us nothing of any such previous revelation from the Lord, and, as expressed by David's men, it seems to me highly unlikely that the Lord would ever have said this. But, though the Lord may not have ever spoken these actual words, through either dream or prophet, as far as David's men were concerned, you didn't have to be a genius to spot such an obvious case of divine providence – and, to them, this remarkable providence was capable of only one interpretation.

David couldn't – and didn't – contest their claim, that the Lord had most definitely 'delivered' Saul into his hand. That was exactly how he saw – and expressed – it too in verse 10. But David most certainly could – and did – contest the interpretation which they placed on this fact!

For everything was down to how the providential happening was to be construed. And people interpret events differently, depending on the condition and attitude of their hearts. To David's men, Saul's unguarded moment provided David with a golden opportunity for David to avenge himself on Saul and to clear his way to the throne. To David, it provided him with a golden opportunity to show compassion and forgiveness to Saul, and, in so doing, in the language of Paul, to 'heap coals of fire on his head', Rom. 12. 20.

I can't believe that any of David's men would have had a problem in interpreting the timely Philistine invasion in chapter 23 as God's way of delivering David out of Saul's hand, and of assuring him that He, the Lord, had all things in His control, and that all David needed to do was to await His time. And the fact that Saul was now at David's mercy – that the Lord had most definitely delivered *Saul* into *his* hand should have been interpreted as further assurance from the Lord that all things were indeed in His control and that David had only to await His time.

But David's men drew the wrong conclusion from this 'providential coincidence'. And I have no difficulty seeing a parallel in the case of the convenient ship which Jonah found waiting at Joppa – about to sail for Tarshish in the far west – in the opposite direction to that where God's word had directed him.

But David read the 'providential coincidence' correctly, and saw the opportunity which he had of killing Saul as a test – both of his faith and of his patience⁸ – and as an opportunity for him to try to repair their relationship and to effect reconciliation between them. David hoped to achieve this by convincing Saul that under no circumstances would he harm the king – as Saul, having had his mind poisoned against David by the lies of some of his advisers, v. 9, apparently believed he would.

We also have to learn that seemingly helpful and convenient circumstances are not *necessarily* a guarantee of God's will and purpose for us. They may be allowed by the Lord as a test of our faith and our purpose of heart.

We need to exercise care how we *interpret* God's providential ways – to be careful what conclusions we draw from them. It is all too easy for us – as David's men – to mistake the opportunity of doing what fits in best with our own wishes for God's approval of what we are doing. The issue for us – as it was for David and his men – is, 'Are we as

God's people to be guided by circumstances alone or by those circumstances read in the light of the principles and teachings of the word of God?⁹

I suggest that, in David's case, it was the *principle* of the sanctity of the Lord's anointed that he found in God's word that enabled him to discern the difference between (i) God's guidance and prompting and (ii) temptation to sin.¹⁰

But what scriptural basis, we may well ask, did David have for concluding that it was not God's will for him to seize the apparently God-given opportunity to kill Saul? Good question. And in answer I refer to something which David himself wrote for the use of the singers in God's sanctuary – recorded for us in 1 Chronicles 16, and reproduced in Psalm 105. There David described how, when the patriarchs 'went from nation to nation, and from one kingdom to another people', the Lord 'suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, he reproveth kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not mine anointed (presumably, those set apart by God's Spirit – that is, His 'chosen'), and do my prophets¹¹ no harm', 1 Chron. 16.20-22; Psa. 105. 13-15.¹²

I suggest that David had his eye on several incidents in the book of Genesis – where he would have found, for instance, how the Lord had protected Jacob and his sons from the men of the cities around Shechem following the slaughter of the men of Shechem by Levi and Simeon – Genesis 34 and 35 record how 'Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land ... and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house' and how that, when they 'journeyed ... the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob', Gen. 34. 30; 35. 5. Again, David would have known how that, by means of plagues, infertility, and dreams, for the sake of Abraham and Sarah, God had 'rebuked' both the Pharaoh of Egypt in Genesis 12 (v. 17), and the Abimelech of Gerar in Genesis 20 (v. 3) – 'Abimelech' being a title rather than a personal name. David may well have noted, in particular, the word of God to the Abimelech, 'I suffered you not to *touch* her', Gen. 20. 6. He was probably also familiar with the warning which a later Abimelech felt constrained to give his people concerning Isaac and Rebekah in very similar circumstances, 'he that *touches* this man or his wife shall surely be put to death', 26. 11.¹³

On the basis of such passages, I suggest, David concluded that, if Saul was 'the Lord's anointed' – and David knew that, in spite of Saul's behaviour and low spiritual condition, he was most certainly that – then God's warning about 'touching His anointed' certainly applied to him also!

And surely David's respect for Saul's office and position serves as a model for us, in that we, as God's people today, are also to show respect for those in positions of authority – whether in society in general¹⁴ or in the church. We may not always agree with their actions – we may not like them as people – but we must respect their position. As far as civil government is concerned, we are, for conscience sake, to be subject to those in authority above us, recognizing that they have been appointed by God, Rom. 13. 1-7.¹⁵ That much the same principle applies in the spiritual realm is clear from the words of the Lord Jesus at the opening of Matthew 23, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not', vv. 2-3.

'*That thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee*'. Literally '... as is good in your eyes'. Which, in the event, is exactly what David did – although this wasn't what his men were hoping he would do!

'*David arose, and cut off the skirt* (the 'wing', the 'outer edge or ends') *of Saul's robe privily*' – stealthily, that is – which the Septuagint renders as 'secretly'. If Saul had laid his robe down in one part of the outer cave, while he attended to his needs in another part, it wouldn't have been difficult for David to have cut off part of its hem without being detected.

Some scholars claim that the hem or edge of a person's garment in the Ancient Near East made a statement about his or her social standing. And that, just as Israel's high priest had an elaborately decorated hem on his robe, Exod. 28. 33-34, so the robe of Israel's first king would have had a distinctive fringe or design – possibly dyed a distinctive colour or containing a special stitching reserved exclusively for the king's use.¹⁶ That is, that the hem of Saul's robe would have served to identify him as a king, symbolising his power and authority.

These scholars point to ancient literature¹⁷ which shows that, in some lands at least, it was a sign of divorce for a husband to cut off the hem of his wife's robe, and that, in diplomatic contexts, the cutting off the hem of a robe signified the breaking of an alliance or treaty.

These scholars conclude that, by cutting off part of Saul's robe, David was therefore symbolically challenging Saul's right to rule – that David's action 'was tantamount to rebellion or freedom from a royal overlord, just as the act of seizing the hem of a king's robe denoted subordination'.¹⁸ For our part, we might compare the statement made in chapter 15 that 'as Samuel turned about to go away, he (Saul, that is) laid hold upon the skirt of his (Samuel's) mantle, and it rent. And Samuel said unto him, The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou', 15. 27-28. There the tearing of the robe signified Saul's forfeiting of the kingdom, and here, it is argued, David was staking his claim to that kingdom – that, by 'cutting off' the fringe of Saul's robe from Saul, he was, in symbolic action, 'cutting off' Saul's royal authority and transferring it to himself.

But did David's action really have this significance? Frankly, I don't know. What I do know is that David wanted to obtain some tangible proof and evidence – which he would then be able to produce for Saul's scrutiny – that Saul's life had been wholly in his power – that, though he had been within striking distance of Saul, he had chosen to do him no harm.

For David knew – and wanted Saul to know – that it would have been just as easy for him, David, to cut Saul's throat as his garment! Josephus put it nicely in his book, *the Antiquities of the Jews*, 'One of David's companions said to him that he had now, by God's providence, an opportunity of avenging himself of his adversary; and advising him to *cut off his head* ... he rose up, and *only cut off the skirt* of that garment which Saul had on'.¹⁹ That is the hem

of Saul's garment was proof positive that David had had both the opportunity and the power to have cut off Saul's head as easily as he had his hem!

And it must have been tempting to do just that. One stroke of David's sword – or the sword of one of his men – and, if all went well, farewell the wilderness and the life of a fugitive – welcome the kingdom and the life of a king. But, no, faith will wait. To David, even a crown was too expensive if it came at the price of having the blood of the Lord's anointed on his hands. Yes, it was true that he had been anointed by Samuel, and that he had received, through Saul's own son, Jonathan, the promise and assurance of the kingdom (20. 13-16; 23. 16-17). But, to David, that was one thing – how that kingdom was to come to him was something else. To David, the Lord's revealed will and purpose must be fulfilled in the Lord's way and in the Lord's time. And so David was content to leave everything in the hands of God. In Psalm 27, David wrote, 'Wait on the Lord ... wait, I say, on the Lord', v. 14, but David knew, not only what it was to wait *on* the Lord, but also what it was to wait *for* the Lord.

As a result of David's restraint – both now and subsequently – David knew he had nothing whatever to fear from the cursing of Shimei on a much later occasion, 'Thou man of blood, man of Belial: the Lord has returned upon you all the blood of the house of Saul in whose stead thou hast reigned', 2 Sam. 16. 7. David's conscience was clear as far as Saul's blood was concerned.

But if *David* had to face the temptation to take a short-cut to kingdom, knowing that it was to be his in due time, we may well pause for a moment to consider how much greater the temptation which faced 'the Son of David' a thousand years later in another wilderness. For, according to Psalm 2, God had explicitly promised Him, as *His* 'Son' and as *His* 'anointed', 'Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession', vv. 2, 8. But in Luke 4 we read how 'the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto him, All this power (authority) will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine', Luke 4. 5-7. And that which the tempter offered the Lord Jesus was that which it was ultimately God's will for Him to have! But the devil's fiery dart found no combustible material. Our Lord's resolve was that God's will must come to pass in *God's* way and in *God's* time – not through the idolatry of submission to the devil, but through the – admittedly far more expensive – road to Golgotha. 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God', the Saviour replied, 'and him only shalt thou serve', Luke 4. 8. For David, refusing to take the 'short-cut' (ahem!) meant enduring a certain amount of hardship and reproach while he awaited God's time, but for the Lord Jesus, it meant 'enduring' no less than 'the cross, despising the shame', Heb. 12. 2.

Verse 5. *'It came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt'*. David's heart was in good shape – both Old and New Testaments testifying that he was a man after God's own heart, 13. 14; Acts 13. 22. David was troubled, not so much because he had damaged a nice robe, but because of *whose* robe he had damaged! For, whether or not David's action in removing the hem of Saul's robe was a symbolic declaration of rebellion – and whether or not this added weight to David's remorse – that robe was *certainly* a symbol of Saul's royal office. And David was conscience-struck that, in damaging it, he was guilty of offering an insult, an affront, to the king's own person. Given who and what Saul was, it was more than an act of vandalism – it was effectively an act of treason – in this case committed against a monarch who had been appointed by God no less! To David's thinking, his act was to be judged, not simply by the amount of damage done, but by the status of the person who suffered the damage. Just as, I suppose, an otherwise trivial action would be regarded as a serious offence if it were committed against the Queen of England or the President of the United States.

David knew that *one day* he was to wear the royal robes in Israel himself – and indeed Jonathan's earlier act of stripping himself in chapter 18 and laying his own robe – the robe of the crown-prince – at David's feet signified just this. But, as far as David was concerned, such robes would be his only in *God's* time and as *God's* gift to him – not by his grasping them for himself.

'David's heart smote him'. We read the same much later in David's life, when 'David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people', 2 Sam. 24. 10. It is clear from these two references that David was blest with a tender conscience, a mark of true and genuine godliness. I note that, in the context of subjection to civil authorities, Paul says, 'You must needs be subject, not only for wrath (that is, 'not only to avoid God's wrath executed through the one vested by God with the necessary authority'), but also *for conscience sake*', Rom. 13. 5. We also read in 1 Timothy 4 of those who have 'their conscience seared with a hot iron', v. 2, and in Ephesians 4 of those who are 'past feeling' – in the context, those who are insensitive to sin, v. 19. Make no mistake, a sensitive conscience is a tremendous blessing and an invaluable guide. May we ever treasure, cultivate and nurture such a conscience.

Verse 6. *'He said unto his men, The Lord forbid that I should do this thing'*. One commentator appropriately heads the section from verse 1 to verse 7, 'David Refuses to *Cave-in* to Peer Pressure'.²⁰

'Unto my master, the Lord's anointed'. This is the first of no less than seven references in chapters 24 and 26 to Saul as 'the Lord's anointed'.²¹ And it was on account of this status that David repeatedly restrained both himself and his men from harming Saul – and, as we find in 2 Samuel 1, it was an Amalekite's claim to have slain the one who in David's book had ever remained 'the Lord's anointed' which sealed his death warrant at David's hand, vv. 14, 16.²²

Verse 7. *'So David stayed his servants with these words'*. The word translated 'stayed' is a particularly strong and violent word – often meaning 'to tear, to gash, to rend or to cleave' – as, for example, in the case of birds for sacrifice.²³ It is also used of 'rending' an animal; Judges 14 records of Samson that, 'the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he *rent* him (the young lion at Timnath which made the tactical error of roaring at Samson!) as he would have *rent* a kid, and he had nothing in his hand', Judg. 14. 6. The word implies therefore that David 'tore into his servants' – possibly 'tore his servants apart'²⁴ – suggesting that David may have needed to use very firm words to cool his men down and to quench their thirst for Saul's blood. There is perhaps a mild word-play

between David's action in 'cleaving' his men with his words here and his 'cleaving' Saul's robe with his knife or sword in verses 4 and 5.²⁵

David not only refused to take Saul's life himself, but restrained his men from doing so also. I suspect that lesser man, in a similar situation, might well have said, 'I wouldn't be happy to kill him myself. But I can't be held responsible – certainly not publicly held responsible – if one of my men happens to do it!' For my part, I recall the earlier words of *Saul* concerning *David*, 'Let not *mine hand* be upon him, but let *the hand of the Philistines* be upon him', 18.17 – thinking thereby to keep his own hands clean of offence. But here David refuses, not only to 'stretch forth' *his* 'hand against' Saul, v. 6, but to allow any of his men to stretch forth their hands against him either.²⁶

Previously *Saul* had been seeking an opportunity to destroy *David*, but, to his shame as he would have reckoned it, he had never managed to find it. Now *David* had a splendid opportunity to destroy *Saul*, but, to his honour as God and we reckon it, he refused to take it. As one old expositor put it, 'His sparing *Saul's life* was as great an instance of God's *grace in him*, as the preserving of *his own life* was of God's *providence over him*.'²⁷

It could be said that David secured several great victories this day – over his men, v. 7, later, over Saul, vv. 17-22, but most important of all – over himself. And I cannot help wondering whether David owed his victory over himself, in part at least, to the ministry of Jonathan in the previous chapter? There we read that 'Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God. And he said unto him, Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth', 23. 16-17. Did Jonathan's word of encouragement go no small way to convincing David that he didn't need to take matters into his own hand?

We might compare the preparatory ministry of Melchizedek, which no doubt contributed to the victory which Abraham gained over a temptation which he also faced on account of a king. The close of Genesis 14 tells how that when 'the king of Sodom went out to meet him (Abram) ... Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine ... and blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand', and that when 'the king of Sodom said unto Abram, Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself ... Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, *the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth*, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take any thing that *is* thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich', Gen. 14. 17-23. It seems to me that Abraham largely owed to Melchizedek his recognition, on the one hand, that he *needed* to accept no 'goods' from the king of Sodom in that his God was 'the Most High God', who possessed everything in heaven and earth, and, on the other hand, that he really *merited* no reward from the king because in the final analysis his recent victory over Chedorlaomer and his confederates had been due entirely to the Most High God delivering them into his hand! How richly blessed we are if we benefit from such ministry from others – and how alert we should each be to opportunities of performing such ministry ourselves, speaking 'that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers', Eph. 4. 29.

'*Saul rose up out of the cave, and went on his way*'. Saul 'rose up' and left his 'rest room', blissfully unaware that the one he reckoned his 'enemy' had just saved his skin by not letting his men 'rise up' against him, v. 7 (the same word).

Verses 8-15 David makes his case - with the use of a visual aid

Verse 8. '*David also arose afterward, and went out of the cave, and cried after Saul, saying, My lord the king*'. David and his men were safely hidden in the cave. All they needed to do was to keep absolutely quiet, let Saul and his men continue on their way, and they could make a speedy exit in the opposite direction. But, throwing caution to the winds, and taking a tremendous risk, David stepped out of the shelter of the cave to shout after Saul. I say 'tremendous risk' because, whereas moments before it was *David* who had had *Saul* completely in his power, now he placed *himself* completely in *Saul's* power – and we do well to remember the 5:1 odds stacked against David and his men. But David *showed* himself to Saul in the hope that he might *show* Saul to himself, and at this point therefore the words of both Saul and David become all-important.

'*When Saul looked behind him*'. David's voice must have been the very last sound Saul expected to hear that day, and I guess that David's cry, 'My lord, the king!', must have made the hair stand up on the back of Saul's neck – the more so when he turned to see David with his face to the ground doing homage before him.

'*David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed himself*'. Clearly David wanted to ensure that, even at a little distance, Saul could see exactly what he was doing – and understand the message it sent. It was critical that Saul understood at the very outset that David posed no threat to his life – and David therefore expressed his allegiance to Saul by action as well as by word.

Verse 9. '*And David said to Saul*'. David gave Saul no time to do anything – or even to reply – but immediately launched into a speech in which he both argued his own innocence, vv. 9-11, and pleaded for the Lord's justice, vv. 12-15.

'*Wherefore hearest thou men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt?*' David was careful to throw the blame for Saul's behaviour upon some of Saul's servants rather than upon the king himself.

It isn't difficult to imagine that David's integrity and success had incited others to hatred and envy – particularly those of the tribe of Benjamin who had no small vested interest in the kingship of Saul.²⁸ Remember Saul's words to 'his servants that stood about him, Hear now, ye Benjamites; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, and make you all captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds', 22. 7. And no doubt many of those men had striven continually to poison Saul's mind against David by their false accusations – men like 'Cush the Benjamite', whose malice and persecution prompted David to write Psalm 7.

Indeed, I note that many of the expressions used in 1 Samuel 24 find clear echoes in Psalm 7 :

I Samuel 24	Psalm 7
'See that there is <i>neither evil nor transgression in mine hand</i> ', v. 11	'If there be <i>iniquity in my hands</i> ', v. 3
' <i>Thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil</i> ', v. 17	' <i>If I have rewarded evil</i> unto him that was at peace with me', v. 3 (same Hebrew as column 1)
' <i>David stayed his servants with these words, and suffered them not to rise against Saul</i> ', v.7	'I have <i>delivered him</i> that without cause is mine enemy', v. 3
' <i>The Lord judge between me and thee</i> ', v. 12. ' <i>The Lord therefore be judge, and judge between me and thee</i> ', v 15	' <i>The Lord shall judge</i> the people: <i>judge me, O Lord</i> , according to my righteousness', v. 8. ' <i>God judgeth</i> the righteous', v. 11
'David said to Saul, Wherefore hearest thou <i>men's words</i> , saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt?', v. 9	'Concerning <i>the words of Cush</i> the Benjamite', <i>title</i> . 'He ... hath ... brought forth <i>falsehood</i> ', v. 14

Verse 10. '*Behold, this day thine eyes have seen how that the Lord had delivered thee to day into mine hand*'. Note David's double use of the word 'day' for emphasis, as he draws Saul's attention to the unmistakable working of God's providence that day – a point which clearly registered with Saul, as witness his words in verse 18, 'when the Lord had delivered me into thine hand, thou killedst me not'.

'*Some bade me kill thee*'. David insisted that, unlike Saul – who, according to verse 9, had given his ear to those who incited him by spreading false rumours about David's alleged murderous plans – he (David) had refused to listen to those who would have incited him to murder Saul in cold blood.

'*Mine eye spared thee*'. That is, 'I had pity on you'.²⁹

'*I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed*'. I suspect that, to some extent, these words had a double application. On the one hand, they meant that David was wholly unwilling to kill Saul because Saul was the Lord's anointed – but, on the other hand, they also carried the less obvious implication that it was surely equally wrong for Saul to seek to kill David, because David was also the Lord's anointed, a fact which, according to verse 20, Saul himself knew well.³⁰ David was therefore setting Saul an example of what Saul's attitude to him should have been.

Verse 11. '*Moreover, my father, see*'. By addressing Saul as his 'king', v. 8, and as his 'lord', vv. 8, 10, and now as his 'father', v.11, David was expressing both his respect *for* Saul and his submission *to* him.

We should be careful not to read *too* much into David's reference to Saul as his 'father'. I think it highly unlikely that David was drawing Saul's attention to any family relationship between them. It is true, of course, that Saul had given his daughter Michal to be David's wife, 18. 27, but it is also quite likely that Saul had already taken Michal from David and given her to another – which is something we learn at the end of the following chapter: 'Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Phalti', 25. 44. Nor is the word 'father' necessarily a term of special affection and endearment. The word was often used in the Ancient Near East simply as a token of respect by an inferior to a superior. We might compare, for example, David's description of himself in the next chapter as Nabal's 'son': 'Give, I pray thee, whatsoever cometh to thine hand unto thy servants, and to *thy son* David', 25. 8, and the address of Naaman's servants to their master, when they 'spake unto him, and said, My *father*, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?', 2 Kings 5. 13. I suspect that here too the term was meant simply as the respectful address by a junior to a senior.

'*Yea, see the skirt of thy robe in my hand: for in that I cut off the skirt of thy robe, and killed thee not, know thou and see that there is neither evil nor transgression in mine hand*'. Note the obvious link between (i) 'the Lord had delivered thee today into *mine hand* ... but ... I said, I will not put forth *mine hand* against my lord' in verse 10, and (ii) 'see the skirt of thy robe in *my hand* ... see that there is neither evil nor transgression in *mine hand*' here. 'Saul', David is saying, 'please take note that I now have, *not* you – and still less evil – *in my hand*, but only the skirt of your robe!' One commentator imagines David saying, 'See the skirt of thy robe. Let this be a witness for me; had that been true which I am accused of, I had now had thy head in my hand, and not the skirt of thy robe; for I could as easily have cut off that as this'.³¹ Josephus had earlier expressed the point well: 'when I cut off the skirt of your garment, I could have done the same to your head'³² – just as, of course, David had once cut off the head of Goliath, 17. 51!

'*See the skirt of thy robe*'. Back in chapter 15, as we noted earlier, in attempting to hold back Samuel from leaving him, Saul had grabbed his robe, and a part of the robe had torn away. Samuel had then informed Saul, 'The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou', 15.27-28. It is just possible therefore that the sight of the skirt of his garment served to remind Saul of his rending of the skirt of Samuel's mantle, and of Samuel's words to him – that, through the sight of his torn robe, God's message to Saul about the transferred kingdom echoed loud and clear, and paved the way for his open confession of David's future kingship in verse 20, 'I know well that thou shalt surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in thine hand'!

Three times David appealed to Saul to 'see' – 'see, yea, see the skirt of your robe in my hand ... see ... there is neither evil ...'. It may be worth noting that the word translated 'evil' in our verse is that rendered 'hurt' in verse 9: 'Wherefore hearest thou men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy *hurt*'? That is, David would be saying, 'Saul, it just isn't true that I seek your harm! And I can prove it. There is no harm in my hand – only the skirt of your

robe!' It has been well said that, 'Though he would not take the opportunity *to slay Saul*, yet he wisely took the opportunity, if possible, *to slay Saul's enmity*, by convincing him that he was not such a man as he took him for'.³³

'Yet thou huntest my soul to take it'. There was therefore no reason, David was saying, that Saul should be 'hunting' him down – the verb, used elsewhere only in Exod. 21. 13, meaning 'to act with malicious intent'.

Verse 12. *'The Lord judge between me and thee'*. In both this verse and in verse 15, David appealed to a higher court, using the very same words.

Verse 13. *'Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked'*. There is no mistaking the meaning of the proverb; the character of a man is revealed by his actions – the same point made, of course, by the Lord Jesus, when He taught that 'the tree is known by his fruit', Matt. 12. 33.³⁴

By means of the proverb, David was saying, 'Saul, if I am really as wicked as your advisors insist I am, and am really out to slay you, I would have done that in the cave'. But I guess that, just as David's words in verse 10 may have been deliberately double-edged, so too may be his quotation of the proverb – that the proverb was not only a vindication of David but a condemnation of Saul – who, in persistently seeking David's life, was revealing the sort of person he really was.

'But mine hand shall not be upon thee'. Repeated for emphasis from verse 12.

Verse 14. *'After whom is the king of Israel come out? after whom dost thou pursue? after a dead dog, after a flea'*. What? – the 'king of Israel', no less, spending his time tracking down a dead dog and a single flea (so the Hebrew)! Saul's conduct, David argued, was not only manifestly unjust and uncalled for, vv. 11-12, but was altogether unnecessary. David sincerely viewed – and described – himself as a perfectly harmless and insignificant man – about whom Saul really didn't need to trouble himself.

'A dead dog'. That which is altogether worthless, that is.³⁵ I think of the words of Abishai to David in 2 Samuel 16, 'Why should this dead dog (Shimei) curse my lord the king? let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head', v. 9, and, even more to the point, of the words of Mephibosheth, when he bowed himself before David, and said, 'What is thy servant, that thou shouldst look upon such a dead dog as I am?', 2 Sam. 9. 8. I wonder whether on that occasion David recalled his words to Saul and was struck that Saul's own grandson should use the very same expression when speaking to him!

'After a single flea'. What could be more inconsequential and contemptible?

I note that some modern versions treat the phrases as questions, and so as veiled threats to Saul. The NIV, for example, reads, 'Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?' In other words, 'If you think', David would then be saying, 'that it will be easy to vanquish me, O king, that you had better think again. For I'm a far more formidable foe than you suppose'. For my part, I believe that the KJV rendering (followed by the Revised Version, JND, RSV and ESV) is far more consistent with the whole tone of David's appeal to Saul. The Good News Bible expresses the thought very well: 'Look at what the king of Israel is trying to kill! Look at what he is chasing! A dead dog, a flea!'

Verse 15. David concludes his appeal by further entreating the Lord to decide between himself and Saul.

*'The Lord therefore be judge'*³⁶. Again, as in verse 12, David referred the dispute to the Lord as the proper Judge, who could both (a) punish the offender and oppressor, and (b) deliver the oppressed. I am reminded of the words of Peter, 'The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations (trials), and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished', 2 Pet. 2. 9.

'And deliver me out of thine hand'. I wonder if Saul remembered the confidence expressed by David to him long before in the Valley of Elah, 'The Lord ... will deliver me *out of the hand* of this Philistine', 17. 37. Saul had then witnessed the Lord do just that, and could therefore rest assured that the Lord would do just as David said now – that David would 'surely be king', v. 20. It was David's son Solomon who later wrote, 'He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city', Prov. 16. 32. And in many ways David's conquest of himself here was more impressive than even his victory over Goliath had been back in chapter 17.

David would then take no action to deliver himself out of Saul's hands. He rested his case entirely in the Lord's hands.³⁷ And the man who meditated day and night in God's law, bowed to the authority of that law; 'Thou shalt not ... bear any grudge against the children of thy people', Lev. 19. 18, and, 'To me belongs vengeance, and recompense ... the Lord shall judge ('bring justice to'³⁸) his people', Deut. 32. 35-36 – the latter reference underpinning Paul's teaching in Romans 12, 'Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord', v. 19.

Verses 16-22 Saul's response

(a) Saul's remorse, vv. 16-19

Verse 16. *'Is that thy voice, my son David? And Saul lifted up his voice, and wept'*. David's actions and words completely knocked the wind out of Saul's sails. Before, when we have heard Saul speaking of David, it has been only as 'the son of Jesse', 20. 27, 30, 31; 22. 7, 8, 13. As I suggested earlier, the words 'son' and 'father', were not necessarily terms of special affection and endearment, but there is no doubt that 'my son David' was a marked improvement on 'the son of Jesse'!

And here, in the latter part of our chapter, we witness a classic case of someone heaping coals of fire on someone else's head – a reference, of course, to Paul's words in Romans 12 immediately following his exhortation to leave any vengeance to the Lord; 'it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head', vv. 19-20. And

the same young man who had once calmed Saul's *frenzy* with his lyre, 16. 23, now calmed Saul's *fury* with his lips – leaving Saul to shed his own tears rather than shed David's blood.

One commentator aptly notes that 'Saul's weeping and his address to David as 'my son' will be echoed ... when David weeps over the death of ... Absalom, who ... attempted to seize the throne from David, as Saul perceives David trying to do from him'.³⁹

There is no reason to doubt that these were genuine tears of remorse and affection on Saul's part, but, alas, subsequent events will prove that Saul's strong emotion and sorrow were short-lived and superficial. It is important to note that the genuineness of someone's repentance is *not* proved by the intensity of his or her emotions at the time – it is demonstrated by the subsequent change in that person's behaviour and the direction of his or her life. 'I'm not so interested how high a man jumps at the time when he says he is saved; I want to see how straight he walks afterwards' is my recollection of something I once heard Tom Taylor say.

One of the Puritans⁴⁰ once wrote, 'Many think they repent when it is not the offence, but the penalty, which troubles them – not the treason but the blood-axe. Some think they repent when they shed a few tears, as Saul did for his unkindness to David ... But for all this he pursues David again. So men can lift up their voice and weep for sins, yet follow their sins again. Others forsake their sin, but still retain their love for it in their hearts, like the snake that casts the coat but keeps the sting. It is an excellent saying ... "He doth truly bewail the sins he hath committed, who never commits again the sins he hath bewailed"'. Ouch!

Verse 17. *'Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil'*. These are words which, interestingly, echo the words spoken long before by David's ancestor Judah concerning his *daughter-in-law* Tamar, 'She hath been more righteous than I', Gen. 38. 26. Here it is of his *son-in-law* David that Saul said, 'You are more righteous than I'.

Saul conceded that David had shown him, not only great, but altogether undeserved kindness. For David rewarded Saul *good for evil*. We will meet in chapter 25 the same contrast, but expressed the other way around, in David's words concerning Nabal, 'this fellow ... hath requited me *evil for good*', 25. 21. And, if it had not been for Abigail's intervention at that time, David would have repaid Nabal's *evil with evil*. We all need to remember Paul's words, again in Romans 12, 'recompense to no man evil for evil ... be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good', vv. 17, 21 – the latter expression meaning in effect, 'Don't meet evil with evil, because that is to be overcome by evil – the only thing which can overcome evil is good!'⁴¹ Just to complete all the logical possibilities from the life of David, at the end of chapter 30, I note that David recompensed *good for good* to the elders of Judah who had supported him during his running from Saul.

Verse 18. *'Thou hast showed me this day how thou hast dealt well with me'*. As a young man, Saul had been capable himself of showing great generosity towards those who opposed and provoked him. At the close of chapter 11, when 'the people said unto Samuel, Who is he that said, Shall Saul reign over us? bring the men, that we may put them to death ... Saul said, There shall not a man be put to death this day: for to day the Lord hath wrought salvation in Israel', vv. 12-13. Now, as a much older man, Saul is able to recognize the same quality in the young man who had spared his life with even greater provocation.

Verse 19. *'The Lord reward thee good'*. A fitting response to verse 17, 'For you have rewarded me good'. Indeed, the word 'good' forms a thread which runs through the section from verse 17 to verse 19, in which Saul used the word translated either 'good' or 'well' no less than four times. He first acknowledged in verse 17 that David had rewarded him 'good', in that, verse 18, David had dealt 'good' with him, and now, in verse 19, expressed his wish that the Lord would reward David 'good' for what he had done, because no man, Saul acknowledged, would ever let his enemy get away from him 'good' – that is, 'unharmful', v. 19.

(b) Saul's realization, v. 20

Verse 20. *'Now, behold, I know well that thou shalt surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in thine hand'*. Back in chapters 13 and 15, Samuel had told Saul plainly that, because of his rebellion against God, his 'kingdom' would not endure but would be given to another – to a man after God's own heart, 13. 14; 15. 28. Saul now openly acknowledged himself that one day David would be king, in confirmation of what Jonathan had said David in the previous chapter, 'Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth', v. 17.

But now, for the first time, Saul recognized, not only that David would 'surely' ('certainly') replace him as king, but that, unlike in the case of his own kingship, David's kingship over Israel would be one of stability and security – 'the kingdom ... shall be established in thine hand'.

Saul knew that, in spite of all his efforts, his own dynasty was doomed to be cut off – yet here conceded that the kingdom of Israel would be 'established' in David's hand. And this was the very assurance which the Lord Himself would later give to David through the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7; 'When thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee ... and I will establish his kingdom ... I will be his father, and he shall be my son ... my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever', 2 Sam. 7. 12-16.⁴²

Taken together with verse 18, Saul was saying, 'I know that, as surely as just now, I – the king – was *in your hand*, so one day the kingdom will be established *in your hand*'.

How sad that, knowing God's purpose and will with such certainty, Saul should continue to resist it to the end. Nevertheless Saul's words concerning David's coming kingship must have been a great encouragement to David at this time.

(c) Saul's request, vv. 21-22

Verse 21. *'Swear now therefore unto me by the Lord, that thou wilt not cut off my seed after me'*. Note the twist, the irony and the injustice of Saul's request. The *twist* to Saul's request lies in that he now asked the man who had 'cut off' part of his garment at the beginning of the chapter to promise him that he wouldn't 'cut off' his descendants or his name in the future – being the same Hebrew word. The *irony* of Saul's request lies in that this matter had already been settled in effect by the covenant made between David and Jonathan back in chapter 20 (vv. 14-17, 41-42). And the *injustice* of Saul's request lies in that Saul himself would continue in the future to go back on his word to David.

Saul's greatest concern was that David spare his descendants, which David readily promised to do. In the event, it would be Saul's sins, and not David's actions, which would destroy Saul's family.

Verse 22. *'And David sware unto Saul'*. We should observe the precise terms of David's covenant with Saul – that David would not cut off his posterity, thus preserving Saul's family (and so his name) from extinction after his death. It is important to note that David did not commit himself to preserve the lives of every one of Saul's descendants. As we know, some years later, to appease the Lord's anger over Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites in violation of Israel's oath to them back in Joshua 9 (vv. 15-20), David agreed to the execution of seven of Saul's descendants – the two sons of Rizpah (one of Saul's concubines), and the five sons of Merab (one of Saul's daughters), 2 Sam. 21. 8-9.⁴³ The Lord was clearly satisfied that David's action was not an infringement of his sacred oath⁴⁴ to Saul – for 'after that God was intreated for the land', 2 Sam. 21. 14. We should note also, however, that at that time David was careful to exclude from the execution Mephibosheth 'the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them', 2 Sam. 21. 7. And so David honoured that which he had sworn both to Jonathan and to Saul. And, consistent with this, it is worth noting that David was quick to have the murderers of Ishbosheth, one of Saul's sons, executed, 2 Sam. 4. 9-12.

Unlike Saul, therefore, who violated the covenant made by Israel with the Gibeonites, David faithfully kept his covenant with him. In this, as in so many other ways, David stands in contrast to Saul – in this case as the covenant-keeper over against the covenant-breaker.

'And Saul went home; but David and his men gat them up unto the hold'. It was one thing for David to be encouraged by Saul's words – as he undoubtedly was – but it was another thing to be stupid! David had sworn to Saul that he wouldn't cut off his seed – but Saul hadn't sworn to David that he wouldn't cut off his head! And, in any case, bitter experience had taught David that Saul's best intentions – even Saul's solemn oaths – were not to be trusted. In one sense, David had been here before – right back at the beginning of chapter 19, 'Saul hearkened unto the voice of Jonathan: and ... sware, As the Lord liveth, he (David) shall not be slain', and yet, the chapter continued, 'Saul sought to smite David even to the wall with the javelin', 19. 1-6, 9-10.

And so chapter 24 ends very much as chapter 23 did. There we read that 'David went up from thence, and dwelt in strong holds at En-gedi', v. 29. Here we read that 'David and his men gat them up unto the hold' – again to take refuge from Saul. The opening of chapter 26 will prove that they were wise to do so!

Pick up the lessons :

Verse 4. We should exercise care how we interpret God's providential ways. It is easy for us to mistake the opportunity of doing what fits in best with our own preferences for God's will for us. Seemingly providential happenings – and indeed all circumstances – must be read in the light of the principles and teachings of God's word. Helpful and convenient circumstances are not necessarily a guarantee of God's will and purpose for us. They may be allowed by the Lord as a test of our faith.

There are perhaps occasions when we too can be tempted to take some 'short cut'. Maybe some 'breakthrough' or 'insight' which will *instantly* lift our Christian living and experience to some higher plane, rather than the demanding and time-consuming labour of day-by-day self-control and sanctification.

Verse 5. We should treasure and cultivate a sensitive conscience. Remember Paul's words to Felix, 'Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men', Acts 24. 16.

Verse 6. We should respect those in positions of authority.

At some time or another, we all face the temptation to get even with those we believe have wronged us in some way. But revenge restrained is a victory gained.

Verse 8. There may be occasions when we will have to take significant risks in attempting to bring about reconciliation.

Verse 16. The genuineness of my repentance is proved, not by the depth and intensity of my emotions at the time, but by the resulting change in my behaviour.

Verse 17. Sadly, it is possible for me to know that I am doing wrong and still to do it.

Verse 17 etc. It is possible for me to recompense (a) evil for good, (b) evil for evil, (c) good for good, or (d) good for evil. Which best describes my response?

Verse 20. Sadly, it is possible for me to know God's will and yet to resist it.

End-notes

¹ See 24. 4, 10, 18.

² See Youngblood.

³ This is one of several 'trilogies' in biblical structure. 1 Samuel 24-26 comprise what we might call *the 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord' trilogy* – see 24. 12, 15; 25. 38-39; 26. 10-11. Genesis 37-39 comprise what we might call *the 'Whose garments are removed – and who is deceived as a result?' trilogy* – see Gen. 37. 31-35 (the garment of a favoured son); 38. 14-15 (the garments of an aggrieved widow); 39. 12-20 (the garment of a senior servant). And Judges 17 to Ruth 4 comprise what we might call *the 'Can any good thing come out of Bethlehem-Judah?' trilogy* – see Judges 17. 7-13 and chapter 18; 19. 1-2 through to the end of chapter 21; and Ruth 1. 1-2 through to the end of chapter 4.

Compare in particular the similar 'bookend' structures of Genesis 37-39 and 1 Samuel 24-26. (i) In *Genesis 37-39*, the middle chapter interrupts the account of the life of the central character, Joseph – to focus on Judah. And yet, in subject matter, the three chapters are clearly bound together – for instance, in each chapter we meet with a deception practised by means of articles worn (whether removed or lost) which function as a pledge or as a proof of something. In each case, the intended target of the deception is asked, even compelled, to identify a specific object or objects, thereby insuring the success of the deception. For further details, see 'Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion: The Garment Motif in Genesis 37–39', John R. Huddleston, JSOT 98 (2002) 47-62. (ii) In *1 Samuel 24-26*, the middle chapter interrupts the account of the life of one of the central characters, Saul – to focus on Nabal. And yet, again, in subject matter, the three chapters are clearly bound together – namely, by the theme of David sparing the life of a man who had wronged him – leaving God to intervene on his behalf as and when He chose.

⁴ Chapters 23 and 24 are linked together by the frequent occurrence of the word 'hand,' which appears twenty times in the Hebrew text of the two chapters. It is found nine times in chapter 23 and eleven times in chapter 24. In chapter 23 the issue is largely that of the effective (or ineffective) use of 'power' (a frequent metaphorical meaning of the word 'hand'); in chapter 24 the stress is rather on the restraint of power than on its use.

⁵ Success in the schemes of life is no proof of God's approval.

⁶ 'Camphire' is the '*al-henna*' of the Arabs, a native of Egypt, producing clusters of small white and yellow odoriferous flowers. It is known to botanists by the name *Lawsonia alba* or *inermis*, a kind of privet, which grows 6 or 8 feet high. "An interesting and relevant archaeological discovery in Level 5 at En-gedi, Tel Goren, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, confirmed that there was a flourishing perfume industry based there during the Single Kingdom period of the OT. There were groups of large barrels measuring up to one metre high, with a variety of utensils, implements, decanters, and perfume jugs, AOTS 224f, Mazar", quoted from 'Rise Up My Love', by Cyril Hocking, Precious Seed Publications, footnote 5 on page 102. See also the helpful footnote 73 on pages 78-79.

⁷ See end-note 18 to the exposition of chapter 22.

⁸ In Saul's entrance alone into the cave, God was testing both David's faith and his patience. We are exhorted to be 'followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises', Heb. 6. 12 – and that was really as true of David as it was of the patriarchs.

⁹ Compare the classic case of the convenient ship at Joppa - about to leave in the opposite direction to that in which God's word had directed Jonah. Helpful circumstances are no guarantee of God's will.

¹⁰ David was not only aware of the earlier history of the chosen line, for example, 1 Chron. 16. 8-22, and found delight in God's law, Psa. 19. 7; 37. 31; 40. 8, but he also made a point of learning from what he learnt there. See, for example, 2 Sam. 11. 18-21. Joab knew that David was not only acquainted with the events of Judg. 9. 50-54, but that he had filed away the lesson – never venture too close to an enemy's wall! In this David has left us a model of how we too should read scripture; see 1 Cor. 10. 1-12.

¹¹ See Gen. 20. 7; Gen. 49. 1.

¹² For 'touch not mine anointed', see Gen. 12.17; 20.3-18; 31.24, 29; and for 'prophets', see Gen. 20.7. The phrase, 'Touch not the Lord's anointed' is sometimes used by so-called Christian leaders, to mean, 'Leaders in the church are above your criticism or rebuke. Your business is just to keep quiet'. In this way, 1 Chron. 16. 22 is employed to prevent a Biblical assessment and evaluation of a man's teaching and lifestyle. Sometimes David's actions in 1 Sam. 24 and 26 are sometimes cited as an example. But, whereas David did respect Saul's office and recognize Saul as 'the Lord's anointed', and as such certainly refused to kill him, yet he was also ready to confront Saul openly with his sin and to rebuke him orally.

¹³ The word 'touch' in both Gen. 20. 6 and 26. 11 being the same as in 1 Chron. 16. 22.

¹⁴ 'I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority', 1 Tim. 2.1-2. In a day when disrespect for government is in vogue, Christians have a challenge to adopt a different attitude. David respected even a morally degraded, insanely driven Saul. Paul indicated that even 'secular' governments, such as the autocratic Roman Empire are God-ordained: 'there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God', Rom. 13.1-2. Believers today ought to honour all in authority, and especially all duly elected public officials.

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- ¹⁵ Solomon once wrote, 'Meddle not with them who are given to change', Prov.24. 21, that is, with those who set out to overthrow by unlawful means the existing government. Did Solomon perhaps get this from David?
- ¹⁶ A hem impressed on a clay tablet is used to identify a prophet in the Mari texts.
- ¹⁷ Akkadian.
- ¹⁸ Wiseman and Yamauchi, 'Archeology and the Bible', page 31. Parallels from cuneiform texts found at Mari and Alalakh 'may imply that David's act in cutting off the 'wing' or hem of Saul's garment was an act of rebellion for which he was later repentant', D.J. Wiseman, 'Alalakh,' in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* ed. D. Winton Thomas, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967, page 128.
- ¹⁹ Antiquities of the Jews, Book VI, Chapter XIII. 4.
- ²⁰ Bob Deffinbaugh, www.bible.org.
- ²¹ 1 Sam. 24. 6 (twice), 10; 26. 9, 11, 16, 23.
- ²² In any case, political assassination would have been a bad precedent for a claimant to a throne. Note the way in which it escalates in 1 Kings 15. 25–16. 27.
- ²³ See its use in Lev.1. 14-17; 11. 3, 7, 26.
- ²⁴ See the marginal note in the NASB.
- ²⁵ Compare NIDOTTE, number 9117, Vol. 4, page 200, referring to a suggestion made by R.P.Gordon – although the words are different in the Hebrew text.
- ²⁶ In effect David was telling his men, 'Don't destroy him!'. Interestingly, Psalm 57 (which was may just have been written concerning this incident – but see footnote 18 to the exposition of chapter 22) is one of four psalms which carry the expression 'Al-taschith' in their titles. In all probability, this expression means, 'Do Not Destroy!'
- ²⁷ Matthew Henry.
- ²⁸ Compare the reaction of the presidents and princes of Persia to Daniel: 'Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him', Dan. 6. 3-4.
- ²⁹ There are several classes of people in Deuteronomy of whom God said, 'thine eye shall have no pity', 7.16; 13.8; 19. 13, 21; 25. 12.
- ³⁰ Compare 1 Sam. 23. 17.
- ³¹ Matthew Henry.
- ³² Antiquities of the Jews, Book VI, Chapter XIII. 4.
- ³³ Matthew Henry.
- ³⁴ Compare Matt. 7. 16-20, although in Matt. 7 the point is rather that His disciples should test character by conduct. The point in Matt. 12 is that conduct reveals character.
- ³⁵ Similar dog metaphors are used in the Amarna letters and the Lachish letters.
- ³⁶ The rare Hebrew verb translated 'judge' in the opening of v. 15 differs from that in v. 12 or in the following expression in v. 15: 'judge between me and thee'. This verb occurs elsewhere only in, 'A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation', Psa 68. 5, where again it is used of God as the judge of the needy. It is very close in meaning to the other word translated 'judge' but, from the usage of the word and its related noun 'judgement', it is a more poetic and elegant term. See TWOT, number 426; NIDOTTE, number 1906, Vol. 1, pages 938-942.
- ³⁷ See the supreme example left by the One who committed His cause 'to him that judgeth righteously', 1 Pet. 2. 22-23.
- ³⁸ The noun related to the first word translated 'judge' in 1 Sam. 24. 15.
- ³⁹ Thomas R. Preston in 'The Heroism of Saul: Patterns of Meaning in the Narrative of the Early Kingship', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (1982); quoted by Youngblood. See 2 Sam. 15. 1-12; 18. 33.
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Watson.
- ⁴¹ Compare 'See that none render evil for evil unto any; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all', 1 Thess. 5. 15, and see 1 Pet. 3. 9, 11, 17.
- ⁴² The Lord can speak what is right therefore not only through the mouth of Balaam's ass, Num. 22. 28-30, and Israel's unbelieving High Priest, John 11. 49-52, but through Israel's backsliding king.
- ⁴³ 'Merab' being a more likely rendering than 'Michal', as in the KJV text. 'The name of Michal, which stands in the text, is founded upon an error of memory or a copyist's mistake; for it was not Michal, but Merab, Saul's eldest daughter, who was given to Adriel the Meholathite as his wife, 1 Sam. 18. 19', Keil and Delitzsch on 2 Sam. 21. 6-10. 'The "oath of [Jehovah]" [in v. 7] takes us back to 2 Samuel 9 and 1 Samuel 20; it refers to the covenant between David and Jonathan in which David promised to show devoted love to Jonathan's house (1 Sam. 20. 15). David was faithful to that promise in 2 Samuel 9, and here he continues to be faithful by exempting Jonathan's son from the Gibeonites' demand. In spite of its semi-parenthetical nature verse 7 is important for our writer. He means to draw a contrast. Note his allusion to the "oath of [Jehovah]" here which David and Jonathan had sworn. Then note his reference in verse 2 to the fact that 'the sons of Israel had gone on oath' to the Gibeonites in Joshua 9. Saul, however, had violated that covenant (v. 2); yet David had remained faithful to the covenant of verse 7. Over against Saul the covenant-breaker our writer places David the covenant-keeper', D. R. Davis.
- ⁴⁴ 'Sacred oath' - 'sware unto me by the Lord ... David sware', 1 Sam. 24. 21-22.