

## THE MEN AT THE BACK WHO NEVER MADE IT TO 'THE FRONT'!<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Having exposed the extent of Saul's alienation from God in chapter 28 verses 3 to 25, the Holy Spirit now picks up the thread from the opening verses of that chapter, and explains how it was that David, having been assured by Achish that he was to accompany the king to the looming battle with Israel, in the event didn't reach Jezreel, the scene of the conflict.

In this chapter the spotlight moves onto Achish, rather than David, with the words of Achish filling almost half the chapter.

### CHAPTER DIVISION

The first half of the chapter records the exchanges between Achish and the other Philistine rulers – following the pattern: (a) the opening words of the rulers, v. 3a, (b) the response of Achish, v. 3b, and (c) the firm and decisive words of the rulers leaving no room for further argument, vv. 4-5.

The second half of the chapter records the exchanges between Achish and David – following much the same pattern as in the first half of the chapter: (a) the opening words of Achish, vv. 6-7, (b) the response of David, v. 8, and (c) the firm and decisive words of Achish leaving no room for further argument, vv. 9-10.

<b>Verses 1-5</b>	<b>Achish and the Philistine rulers.</b>	<b>'Is not this David ... ?'</b>
<b>Verses 6-11</b>	<b>Achish and David.</b>	<b>'Your services will not be required, thank you!'</b>

### EXPOSITION

<b>Verses 1-5</b>	<b>Achish and the Philistine rulers.</b>	<b>'Is not this David ... ?'</b>
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**Verse 1.** *'The Philistines gathered together all their armies to Aphek'.* As I noted when introducing chapter 28, chronologically this verse follows straight on from the opening two verses of that chapter. The Philistines first 'gathered together all their armies' at Aphek before making their way north, mainly up the coastal strip, to Shunem, 28. 4. (For details of the main locations, see Annex A – 'Map of Israel in the days of Saul and David'.)

I know that some have conjectured that the 'Aphek' of our verse is not in fact the 'Aphek' of 4. 1, and was located somewhere in the far north, not far from Shunem and Gilboa. For example, the Keil/Delitzsch commentary on our verse reads, 'Aphek, which must be carefully distinguished from the towns of the same name in Asher ... upon the mountains of Judah ... and ... at Ebenezer (1Sam. 4. 1), is to be sought for not very far from Shunem, in the plain of Jezreel'. But I cannot accept this.

First, I note we are told explicitly that David and his men came 'to Ziklag on the third day', 30. 1. But the Shunem area was a good ninety miles journey from Ziklag, and it would have been impossible for David and his men to have covered such a distance in just three days. Second, it is most improbable – bordering, I suggest, on the impossible – that the other Philistine contingents would have failed to notice the presence of David and his 600 men as they made their way with Achish all the way from Gath, the southernmost city of the Philistines, right up to the Shunem area in the far north. Third, there are only two references to an 'Aphek' in the book of 1 Samuel; namely in 4. 1 and in 29. 1. I consider it is most unlikely that, without one word of clarification, chapter 29 should be speaking of an entirely different Aphek to that which featured prominently back in chapter 4. Fourth, we are told that the Aphek of 4. 1 had been the site where the Philistines first mustered their troops prior to the battle fought with Israel at Ebenezer. I find it hardly surprising therefore that the Philistines should use the same Aphek as their rallying point on this occasion. For these reasons, I am satisfied that the 'Aphek' here in chapter 29 is one and the same as the 'Aphek' of chapter 4.<sup>2</sup>

It was necessary for me to cover this point in some detail because, as I have no doubt some of you have noticed, the chronological sequence which I have suggested for the events recorded in chapters 28 and 29 rests on this identification.

We find therefore that Aphek played a key role in the first and the last battles between Israel and the Philistines recorded in 1 Samuel. And the outcome of both battles, separated by a generation, was the same – game, set and match to the Philistines.

*'The Israelites pitched by a fountain which is in Jezreel'.* We can hardly miss that the chapter both begins and ends with a reference to Jezreel. We are told at the close of our verse that it was there that 'the Israelites pitched', and at the close of verse 11 that the 'Philistines went up to Jezreel'. It was, therefore, in the Valley (or, Plain) of Jezreel, that battle would be joined. This 'Valley of Jezreel' had been the scene of the battle, many years before, when Gideon, with his gallant three hundred warriors, had routed the combined forces of the Midianites, Amalekites and

children of the east, some 135,000 in number, Judg. 6. 33-8. 21 – that's odds of 450:1! Alas, in the *forthcoming* battle at Jezreel, Israel would not fare so well!

The Valley, joining with the Valley of Esdraelon to the west<sup>3</sup>, is the main corridor through the rugged Palestinian hills, forming the crossroads of two major routes: (i) that which leads from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Jordan River Valley on the east – which is the only course across not impeded at all by the ranges of hills, and (ii) that which leads from Syria, Phoenicia, and Galilee in the north to the hill country of Judah in the south. The Philistines, as the Midianite alliance before them, clearly realized that a victory over Israel at this point would give them a major strategic advantage, effectively cutting the land of Israel into two and providing them with a launching pad from which to attack both Galilee in the north and the main area of Israel in the south.<sup>4</sup>

Although we read that the Israelites were at Jezreel first, I think we must assume that Saul was somehow aware of the Philistine plans to attack in the north, and so positioned his forces there in readiness. I can see no way in which, otherwise, Saul would have moved his whole army as far north as Jezreel with the Philistines massing at Aphek. That would have left the entire central section of Israel open to a Philistine invasion.

Apart from which, we noted when looking at chapter 28 (v. 4) that the Philistines had every reason for preferring to engage Israel on the level ground of the Jezreel Valley, where their numerous iron chariots would give them a decided advantage. For them to have launched a full-scale attack from Aphek – and it was to be a 'full-scale' attack; I note that they 'gathered together *all their armies* to Aphek' – for the Philistines to have launched a full-scale attack from Aphek would have required them to cross the Hill Country of Ephraim to reach the area around Shiloh and Gilgal – with all the drawbacks of negotiating the mountainous terrain.

Saul was clear that this wasn't to be some border skirmish between two standing armies – this was to be a major show-down between two nations. The Philistines were going for a knock-out!

**Verse 2.** *'The lords of the Philistines passed on by hundreds, and by thousands'*. The Philistine army was broken down into military divisions of hundreds and thousands. This seems to have been standard military practice in ancient days. We read of 'captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds' in Israel several times in the days of Moses, Num. 31. 14, 52, 54; Deut. 1. 15, and of how, when facing the forces of Absalom, David set 'captains of thousands and captains of hundreds' over 'the people that were with him', 2 Sam. 18. 1. Indeed, the implication of Saul's words back in chapter 22 is that he had done the same; 'Saul said unto 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.<sup>5</sup>

The word translated 'lords' occurs 21 times in the Old Testament, always referring to Philistine 'lords', and on every other occasion seemingly to the rulers of the five Philistine city states.<sup>6</sup> I note, in particular, that the expression 'the five lords of the Philistines' recurs throughout the books of Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel.<sup>7</sup> The Philistine realm consisted of a pentapolis in which the 'lord' of each of the five cities shared equal authority with the others, but for political and military purposes the five city rulers often worked closely together. That, on this occasion, all five Philistine lords attended in person, along with their various contingents, shows just how crucial the Philistines considered this particular battle to be.

It was not then, as we might be tempted to interpret the opening of the verse, that there were hundreds and thousands of 'lords' – there were only five – but that the troops belonging to these lords passed by on review by hundreds and by thousands.

*'But David and his men passed on in the rereward with Achish'*. Of the five brigades of soldiers who trooped by that day, the fifth and last was that of Achish. As commander of the king's personal bodyguard, David would doubtless have accompanied Achish at the rear of his brigade. In other words, David was at the back of the entire Philistine army.

This was one of the most critical positions of all, for it often happened in a battle that one army would attempt to outflank another, so as to attack them from the rear as well as from the front. Indeed, it sometimes happened that one army in its entirety would circle around behind the opposing army to attack them from the back. As it happens, this was a tactic which David, following divine direction, successfully adopted against the Philistines themselves in 2 Sam. 5; 'When David inquired of the Lord, he said, Thou shalt not go up (advance to meet the foe, that is, to attack them in front); but fetch a compass ('circle round') behind them, and come upon them (attack them) over against the mulberry trees', 2 Sam. 5. 23. David did just that and completely routed the Philistines.

For such reasons, those stationed at the back of an army were among the finest, bravest, and most capable warriors. And, thanks to the unbounded confidence which Achish had in David, he and his men were given this great honour.

It seems that it was about now that seven outstanding warriors from the tribe of Manasseh joined David's company. 1 Chronicles 12 informs us that 'there fell some of Manasseh to David, *when he came with the Philistines against Saul to battle*', 1 Chron. 12. 19, which description fits only the brief period between David's commission from Achish at Gath, 28. 1-2, and his departure from the Philistine army at the close of this chapter.<sup>8</sup>

Although Aphek itself falls within the Israelite tribal territory of *Ephraim*, it is only five miles from the border with *Manasseh* – through which territory the Philistines would be marching north to Shunem. It is, in any case, always possible, of course, that the incident recorded in verses 3-11 didn't actually occur at the Philistine gathering point at Aphek itself but at some short distance along the road north, perhaps very soon after the Philistine forces entered the territory of Manasseh.

The seven who defected to David weren't insignificant men by any means – they had been prominent military leaders in their own tribe. 1 Chronicles 12 says, 'there fell to him of Manasseh, Adnah, and Jozabad, and Jedaiel, and Michael, and Jozabad, and Elihu, and Zilthai, captains of the thousands that were of Manasseh', and then adds

that 'they helped David against the band of the rovers: for they were all mighty men of valour', 1 Chron. 12. 20-21. 'The band of the rovers' against whom these seven 'mighty men of valour' fought alongside David was no doubt the Amalekite raiding party of chapter 30. In this connection, I note that the expression 'the band of the rovers' translates just one Hebrew word – often carrying the meaning 'a raiding party'<sup>9</sup> – and that the same word is used in chapter 30 to describe the Amalekites, being rendered there 'troop' in verse 8, and 'company' in verses 15 and 23. I think we can take it for granted that such men as these seven captains would never have ignored Saul's desperate call to arms at this time and chosen rather to throw in their lot with David *unless* they had been wholly convinced that, when it came to the big battle, David would be fighting *for* Israel and not *against* them!<sup>10</sup>

**Verse 3.** *'Then said the princes of the Philistines'*. Some commentators distinguish between 'the lords' of the Philistines mentioned in verses 2, 6-7 and the men who confronted Achish in verses 3-5.<sup>11</sup> They point out that the words used to describe them are different, and that, whereas the word translated 'lords' is used only in a technical sense to speak of the five kings of the Philistines, the word rendered 'princes' is used very commonly through the Old Testament<sup>12</sup> in a wide range of contexts to refer to leaders, officials or captains in many nations, including, for example, both Abner in chapter 17, verse 55, and David in chapter 22, verse 2. These commentators suggest that the objections to David's presence therefore came from 'the military commanders' of the Philistines who would be doing the actual fighting on behalf of the Philistine 'lords' – and therefore could be said to have the most to lose (their necks, to be precise) if David proved to be a turncoat.

Other commentators take the view that the words refer to the same individuals and that the variation is introduced simply for stylistic reasons. As I see it, the concluding words of Achish in v. 6, 'the lords favour thee not', point most strongly to only one set of leaders being in view throughout the section – namely the other four 'lords' of the Philistines.

And, when these lords observed David and his men in the rearguard, they were dumbfounded! And the appointment of David to his personal bodyguard by which Achish had meant to bring only *honour* to David brought only *horror* to his four allies.

*'What do these Hebrews here?'* 'Achish, have you lost the plot?', the other Philistine lords want to know. 'Don't you know who we will be fighting? Hebrews, that's who! And who do you put right behind us to guard our backs in the fight? Hebrews!'

'Hebrews' being the way in which, throughout 1 Samuel, the Philistines consistently refer to the Israelites.<sup>13</sup>

Given that those who joined David from Manasseh at this time numbered only seven – and the Philistines would probably have had no way of knowing, as we have been told, that these were 'mighty men of valour' – I see no reason to believe that it was their presence in particular which sparked the Philistine objection.

*'Achish said unto the princes of the Philistines, Is not this David, the servant of Saul the king of Israel, which hath been with me these days, or these years, and I have found no fault in him since he fell unto me unto this day?'* But Achish was quick on the draw. 'Have you never heard of mercenaries?', he shot back, 'for that's David and his men are, and I can assure you that since he "defected" to me – since he transferred his allegiance to me (the meaning of the word translated "fell unto me"<sup>14</sup>) – I have found him to be wholly dependable. What's the problem?'

The expression 'these days, or these years' is an idiom meaning something like 'a year or two' – which is perfectly consistent, of course, with the fact that David dwelt in the country of the Philistines for 'a full year and four months', 27. 7.

Not bad, Achish, although I guess you might have found some slightly *less* provocative way to describe David than 'the servant of Saul the king of Israel!' But I wonder what you would have said if you had known, Achish, that you, the deceived, were here doing your level best to defend your deceiver!

For my part, at this point, I cannot help but compare the words used by this pagan ruler about David, 'I have found no fault in him', with the words used by another pagan ruler about 'the Son of David', our Lord Jesus, of whom he said, three times, 'I find no fault in him', John 18. 38; 19. 4, 6. But what a difference! For, contrary to the charge laid against Him by the Jews before that same pagan governor, Matt. 27. 63, and in marked contrast to David, *He*, the Lord Jesus, was no 'deceiver'! With his eye on Isaiah 53. 9, Peter accurately said of Him, 'who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth', 1 Pet. 2. 22.

**Verse 4.** *'The princes of the Philistines were wroth with him; and the princes of the Philistines said unto him, Make this fellow return'*. The Philistine rulers were not only aghast – they were irate, demanding that their naïve ally, 'Make this fellow (literally, 'the man') return' – which, notwithstanding his apologetic disclaimer to David, is what, for his part, Achish is compelled to tell David to do, 'now return', verse 7, and is what, not withstanding his protested innocence to Achish, for his part, David is finally compelled to do, 'David ... rose up ... to return', v. 11!

*'Let him not go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he be an adversary<sup>15</sup> to us: for wherewith should he reconcile himself unto his master? should it not be with the heads of these men?'* The lords argue first from common sense, v. 4, and then from history, v. 5. First, they point out they could think of no better way for David to manoeuvre himself back into Saul's good books than by operating as a fifth column<sup>16</sup> within the Philistine ranks and, when the occasion came, by rolling some Philistine heads. Interestingly, the Septuagint renders the words 'Lest in the battle he be an adversary to us' as 'let him not be a traitor ('a plotter') in the camp'.

I suppose that, from their perspective, the man who had earlier gotten himself *instated* into the royal family of Israel by slaying a few hundred Philistines and producing their *foreskins* as proof of his *prowess*, 18. 25-27, might well be thinking that he could just as easily get himself *reinstated* into that royal family by producing some Philistine *heads* as proof of his *loyalty*!

'With the heads of these men', they say, in all likelihood pointing to the Philistine troops which had just paraded past. But I discover from 1 Chronicles 12 that the Philistine lords' *real* concern lay as much – and probably far more,

I suspect – with *their own heads!* For there we read that 'the lords of the Philistines upon advisement ('upon counsel' – that is, 'upon deliberation'<sup>17</sup>) sent him away, saying, He will fall to his master Saul to the jeopardy of *our heads* (literally 'with our heads'), 1 Chron. 12. 19. That is, they were saying in effect, 'Achish, you say that, at some time in the past, this man "*fell*" ('defected') to you from Saul, v. 3. We say that he could just as easily in the future "*fall*" ('defect' – the same word) back *to Saul from you!* And frankly we have a nasty suspicion he may well do it with our heads in his hand! And, for my part, I have a suspicion that Goliath would have agreed with them – remember the closing section of chapter 17, where we read that, 'as David returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul *with the head of the Philistine in his hand*', 17. 57.

And we can hardly forget David's later tactic, to which I referred earlier, which, under God's direction, he successfully employed against the Philistines, when he circled round behind their army and attacked them from the rear, 2 Sam. 5. 23-25. No fools these Philistine lords!

I find it intriguing that, whereas the Philistine rulers say to Achish concerning David, 'Let him not go *down* with us to battle', later, when speaking to David, Achish quotes the Philistine lords as having said, 'He shall not go *up* with us to the battle', v. 9. I assume that in this verse they have in mind that, having reached the battle ground itself, both sides would take their starting positions on the higher ground, from which they would then 'go down' to the actual fray, whereas in v. 9 they were thinking of their current journey northwards, and upwards, into the higher central ground of Canaan – and, in confirmation, I note the expression in verse 11 that 'the Philistines *went up* to Jezreel'.

**Verse 5.** *Is not this David, of whom they sang one to another in dances, saying, Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands?* So much for the Philistine leaders' argument from common sense, v. 4. Now came the history lesson – or was it a music lesson? – as the other rulers sarcastically hurl back at Achish the very same words he had used when commencing his defence of David, 'Is not this David?', v. 3. It was the repetition of these words which suggested to me the heading I have given to the first half of the chapter.

The words of Achish's comrades to Achish also echo perfectly the words of the servants of Achish to him back in chapter 21, 'Is not this David ... ? Did they not sing ('answer') one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands', 21. 11. 'Achish', I can almost hear the Philistine lords saying, 'you were ready to listen to your servants then and to send David packing. Listen to your fellow kings now, and do the same again! Achish, every youngster in Ekron Elementary School knows that song. They're still singing it!'

And I'm not making that bit up; the tense the Philistine lords use is literally, 'of whom they *sing* ('answer') in dances', and not 'of whom they *sang* ('answered') in dances'.

Back to the Philistine lords, 'And what do you think that popular composition was written to celebrate? Full marks, Achish – people being "slain" – but which people, pray? Philistines, that's who! And, apart from obviously extolling David's exploits above those of Saul, what else does the little ditty tell you? It tells you that Saul and David were once on the same side – were once linked together against a common foe – were once linked together against *us!* Achish, send "the man" back – and that's final!

And I can't help noting that, in His own inscrutable way, God used the very song which had turned Saul against David in the first place to stop David from coming to Saul's aid now.

## **Verses 6-11 Achish and David.**

### **'Your services will not be required, thank you!'**

**Verses 6-7.** Achish got the message – the other leaders were in dead earnest – and there *were* four of them to one of him. He had no choice but to do as they said.

'Achish called David, and said unto him, *Surely, as the Lord liveth*'. We may be rather surprised to hear an oath in the name of 'Jehovah who lives' on the lips of a Philistine. But it was in fact normal practice in the ancient world to express one's oath in the name of the God of the person to whom one was speaking. We can compare the words of the widow of Zarephath in pagan Sidon, the home, indeed, both of Jezebel and of Ba'al, when she answered Elijah, 'As the Lord (Jehovah) thy God liveth, I have not a cake', 1 Kings 17. 12.

'*Thou hast been upright, and thy going out and thy coming in with me in the host is good in my sight: for I have not found evil in thee since the day of thy coming unto me unto this day: nevertheless the lords favour thee not. Wherefore now return, and go in peace, that thou displease not the lords of the Philistines*' 'The lords favour thee not' is, literally, 'you are *not good in the eyes of the lords*', and stands in deliberate contrast to how Achish naïvely viewed both David's actions and David's person – David's actions, 'your going out and your coming in with me in the camp are *good in my eyes*', v. 6, and David's person, 'I know that *you are good in my eyes*', v. 9 (literal translations in both cases).

**Verse 8.** 'David said unto Achish, *But what have I done? and what hast thou found in thy servant so long as I have been with thee unto this day, that I may not go fight against the enemies of my lord the king?*' I do not believe that, in one sense, David was doing any acting here – as he had before Achish back in chapter 21, when I suppose we could say that David did the only sane thing in the circumstances and acted the part of a madman! I believe that David was genuinely and sincerely disappointed at Achish's reluctant ruling because he had been counting on making his mark *for Israel* at Jezreel.

The question, 'What have I done?', was one which David had had occasion to ask on several occasions before – in chapter 17 of his brother, Eliab (v. 29); in chapter 20 of his friend, Jonathan (v. 1), and in chapter 26 of his king, Saul (v. 18). On each previous occasion, it had been the genuine protest of wounded innocence – his conscience bearing him witness that he had done nothing wrong. But this time David knew better – and, in that sense, he was acting, for, though David knew that Achish hadn't 'found' any reason which would have disqualified him from

participating in the imminent battle with Israel, that was only because he had managed to pull the wool very successfully over Achish's eyes all the time he had been in the land of the Philistines.

No doubt, when David spoke of 'my lord the king', he intended Achish to assume he was referring to Achish. But I note that, when expressing his longing to 'fight against the enemies of my lord the king', David was very careful to use the common word for 'lord' or 'master' (*'ādôn*), and *not* the technical word used to describe the 'lords' of the Philistines (*seren*) in verses 2, 6 and 7 – thereby leaving it wide open whether, by this word, he meant Achish or Saul.

We know, of course, that David had used the exact expression 'my lord the king' of Saul in both chapters 24 and 26.<sup>18</sup> And we are fully aware also of his challenge to Abner concerning 'the lord your king', 26. 15, and of his address to Saul personally, 'my lord, O king', 26. 17.

We can have no doubt, therefore, that to David there had only ever been one 'my lord the king'! And, interestingly, Achish himself used this very word for 'lord' (*'ādôn*) when speaking of Saul in verse 10 – literally translated, 'the servants of your lord'. Undoubtedly, therefore, when David spoke to Achish of '*the enemies of the lord my king*' he had in mind the same people as Saul had in mind back in chapter 18 when he had sent his servants to David to inform him that 'the king' required no dowry for Michal beyond 'an hundred foreskins of the Philistines' – that he might be avenged 'of the king's enemies (the same word)', 18. 25.

But, as earlier in verse 2 of chapter 28, Achish failed to spot the spin which David put on his words.<sup>19</sup> And so, the David who had succeeded in deceiving Achish (a) back in the latter half of chapter 21, (b) throughout the latter half of chapter 27, and (c) in the opening of chapter 28, now succeeds in doing so again in chapter 29!

**Verses 9-10.** '*Achish answered and said to David, I know that thou art good in my sight, as an angel of God*'. Achish was the first of three people who, while addressing David, spoke in terms of him being 'as an angel of God'. Some time later there was the wise woman of Tekoah, who said to David, '*as an angel of God*, so is my lord the king to discern good and bad', 2 Sam. 14. 17. And, later again, there was Mephibosheth, who said to David, when speaking about Ziba, 'he hath slandered thy servant unto my lord the king; but my lord the king is *as an angel of God*', 2 Sam. 19. 27. Both the wise woman and Mephibosheth were paying tribute to David's powers of discernment, but, ironically, Achish was paying tribute to David's goodness and integrity. Poor, deluded Achish. And we cannot miss the tremendous irony that no less than three times in our short chapter this Philistine lord expresses his faith in David's integrity; first, 'I have found no fault in him', v. 3; then, 'I have found no evil in thee', v. 6; and now, to cap it all, 'thou art ... as an angel of God', v. 9 – because we know that Achish's *unqualified confidence* rested foursquare on David's *unscrupulous deception*.

**Verse 11.** '*So David and his men rose up early to depart in the morning, to return into the land of the Philistines, And the Philistines went up to Jezreel*'. When considering the opening verses of chapter 28, we noted that, because the hill country to the east required the Philistine forces to keep to the coastal strip for much of the way, their trek from Aphek to the Valley of Jezreel would have covered 50-55 miles – involving them in a hard march over several days.

For his part, David headed back to Ziklag, 'the 'place' which, as the other Philistine lords had expressed it, Achish 'had appointed him', v. 4. The distance from Aphek to Ziklag was in the region of 40 miles, which evidently took David and his men between two and three days to cover – for they arrived at Ziklag on the third day, 30. 1. Allowing time for David to get his bearings at Ziklag in the light of the devastation he found there, and for him then to pursue the Amalekite invaders beyond the book (or, ravine) Besor, 30. 9-10 – which was several miles distant from Ziklag – he and his men must have been engaged in battle with the Amalekites at about the very time that the army of Israel was engaged in battle with the Philistines.

I note something of a contrast between David's action at the end of this chapter and Saul's action at the end of chapter 28 – which two actions must have taken place within days of each other. At the close of chapter 28, Saul *knew* that he would shortly be facing a great battle – and that it was a battle he *couldn't* win. And, in the event, Saul lost everything. At the close of our chapter, David didn't yet know that he too would shortly be facing a great battle – but this would be a battle which he *did* win. And, in the event, David recovered everything.

I suggest that it is appropriate therefore – and perhaps intentional – that the Holy Spirit closes chapter 28 with a verse which, translated literally, speaks of Saul and his servants '*rising and going in the night*', 28. 25, whereas He closes our chapter with a verse which, again translated literally, speaks of David and his men '*rising and going in the morning*', 29. 11. Perhaps by this choice of words, the Holy Spirit is suggesting that Saul's sun was about to set while David's sun was about to rise!

And so, ironically, we find David *the Israelite* compelled to return to *the land of the Philistines* while *the Philistines* continue on their way into the heart of *the land of Israel!*

Our verse tells us that 'the Philistines went up to Jezreel', where, as we saw in verse 1, Israel was already camped, and so points on to the start of the great battle in that, when the Philistines reached Jezreel, the time of waiting and preparation would be over. But we must wait for chapter 31 to take up the story again.

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That then is our chapter. But we are by no means finished. When we considered chapter 27, I ended by noting that, although David's flight to the Philistines 'had betrayed scant faith in God and His ability to fulfil His promises in preserving David, the Lord had graciously cared for him there'. I added that, 'this doesn't *necessarily* mean, of

course, that David's action in leaving the land of Israel for the land of the Philistines turned out for the best in the long run', and promised to come back to 'the question whether that was so or not' when we reached the end of chapter 29, and, as I said, had 'the advantage of observing the developments there'.

As we have now reached the end of chapter 29, the time has come to ask, 'Well, did David's action as reported at the beginning of chapter 27 – that he "arose, and ... passed over ... unto Achish" – did his action lead to a better outcome for him, for his men, for his nation, and for the long-term development of God's purpose, than if he had remained in the land of Israel?'

At the outset, I have to say that I can see no simple answer to the question. And that mainly because there are so many imponderables.

But let's start with one or two things about which we can be reasonably sure. If David *had* stayed in the hill country of Judah, there can be no real doubt that, as C. H. Mackintosh put it, 'his God would have been a wall about him'. And I think we can take it for granted also that, if and when the Philistines had gathered their armies for a full-scale attack on Israel, David would have thrown himself enthusiastically into the fray on Israel's behalf.

But the question is whether then, given Saul's deep-seated hostility to him, David would have felt able to offer his services to the king, or would he have felt constrained to fight the Philistines independently from Saul? And, had David decided to offer his services, would Saul have been man enough to have put the past behind him, to have accepted David's offer, and to have welcomed David to join forces with him?

Then the question becomes, whether or not Saul had been prepared to do that, would the involvement of David and his 600 followers in the conflict have actually tipped the scales in Israel's favour? What difference would his company have made to the outcome of the battle? We really don't know – although we are aware that David's men were far from being ordinary, 'run of the mill' soldiers. For I am sure we have all read with amazement some of the breath-taking exploits of David's 'mighty men' recorded in 2 Samuel 23. Then, again, the victory which David and his men achieved in the next chapter, over a much, much larger Amalekite force than themselves, might also suggest that they were likely to have made a significant impact in any engagement with the Philistines – although, to be fair, when assessing David's victory in the next chapter, we should take account of the complacency of the Amalekites at the time when David and his men launched their surprise attack. And again, in our own chapter, we have read of the Philistine rulers' fears that David and his men might have changed sides during the forthcoming battle, clearly believing that this could well have swung the outcome of the battle in Israel's favour, resulting not only in their loss of face but, as we noted, in the loss of their heads! But whether David's involvement would have actually done that, we have no way of knowing.

In any case, whether or not Israel had then actually won the great battle, if David had been involved, would Saul and/or his sons still have fallen and been slain in the fighting? And, if Saul had been slain, would all Israel – not only David's tribe of Judah, but *all* Israel – would they then have readily and immediately hailed David as king in Saul's stead, thereby avoiding the painful 7½ year civil war recorded in 2 Samuel 2-4?

And all this assuming, as surely we must, that David himself would have survived the battle. I say 'we must' because, on God's instructions, Samuel had anointed David as Israel's next king. And we can be confident therefore that, because God is God, neither Saul nor the Philistines – neither David's men nor even David himself – could keep David from becoming Israel's next king – that God's purposes were sure and certain.

But then it is obvious that David could only actually become king on the death of Saul. And it is clear from Samuel's words in chapters 15 and 28 that, as a result of Saul's disobedience, it was God's will that Saul die on Gilboa, and, as we know, the defeat of Israel was to be caught up in that.<sup>20</sup>

So, what would have happened if David had remained in Israel and not gone down to the Philistines? In terms of the long-term development of God's purpose would things have turned out better?

Frankly, I don't know the answers to such questions – and what is more, *I don't need to!* For what matters in the end is that what happened did happen!

And I not only know that God most definitely overruled events to see that David was off the scene at the big battle at Gilboa, but I am fascinated to watch the way in which He did so. For, whether or not *the king of Israel* would have welcomed David's presence at the battle, *the four lords of the Philistines* certainly didn't!

And, without any doubt, it was as well for David that the Philistine lords voiced their objections to his presence as strongly as they did. Because, as a result, David was compelled, against his wishes, to retrace his steps to his own city, not knowing as yet how urgently his presence was needed there.

It is surely impossible for us to miss the merciful intervention of God's providence, by means of which David was sent back home just in time to recover his wives and property from the marauding Amalekites, 1 Sam. 30.

And so it was that, when the four Philistine lords were overruling the plans of Achish, the one true and sovereign 'Lord' was overruling the plans of David! And what is more He was using the Philistines to do so!

Not that this was the first time that the Lord had turned David's enemies into his saviours! At the end of chapter 23, the Lord had then used the Philistines, unwittingly, to play the key role in delivering David and his men *from Saul* – here in chapter 29, He used the Philistines, also unwittingly, to play the key role in delivering his and his men's families and possessions *from the Amalekites!*

And so, the very same Philistines, who were shortly to be God's instruments to remove Saul out of the way that David might obtain a crown, were now God's instruments to dispatch David back to Ziklag – and that with haste, 29. 10 – that David might obtain back his wives.

We can do no better than to exclaim with Paul, 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!', adding, with our eyes, as Paul had his, on Isaiah 40 verse 13, 'for who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?', Rom. 11. 33-34.

In what was to become by far his best-known psalm, David later wrote, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies', Psa. 23. 5 – but, very wonderfully, as has been noted many times, the One who prepares a table for His people in the presence of their enemies also has the happy knack of sometimes making those very enemies prepare the table!

And so God proved unquestionably that His hand was over all the events of David's life – working everything for the fulfilment of His own gracious purpose for him.

But that does *not* mean that what David did in chapter 27 was therefore in accordance with God's will – any more than what Judas Iscariot did when he betrayed the Lord Jesus was God's intention for him. Of that infamous action, the Lord Himself said, 'Truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!', Luke 22. 22. And, on the basis of those words of the Saviour, I guess we could say that Judas's act was both part and parcel of God's will in one sense, and entirely contrary to His will in another.<sup>21</sup> The fact is that God *permitted* the villainous action of Judas, and, in His own unique and wonderful way, caught up that action into the sweep of His vast eternal purpose. And the same could be said of other cases, such as the envy of Joseph's brethren, where God is explicitly said to have brought 'good' out of 'evil', Gen. 45. 7-8; 50. 20. Do I understand it? You must be joking! Do I believe it? Does it fill me with a sense of awe and wonder? Indeed it does!

And here in 1 Samuel 27-31, God demonstrated that He never ceased to exercise control even over events which *appeared* to run counter to His purpose – in this case David's running to the Philistines.

Speaking personally, I find the most directly relevant and helpful comparison in the history of Jonah. We have it on the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself that the repentance of the men of Nineveh was occasioned largely by the fact that Jonah was himself 'a sign' to them – and this in respect of his prolonged experience in the great fish, Matt. 12. 40; Luke 11. 30.<sup>22</sup> That is, the prophet's extraordinary experience provided the men of Nineveh with evidence to support the truth of his message – just as our Lord's own experience of death, burial and resurrection serves to accredit and confirm the truth of His claims, John 2. 19; Rom. 1. 3-4. As I understand our Lord's words, Jonah's experience provided the basis for Nineveh's repentance and faith then, just as His own death and resurrection provide the basis for repentance and faith today.

It goes without saying therefore that, had the prophet not been swallowed and subsequently disgorged by the fish, he wouldn't have been a 'sign' to anyone of anything – and, in which case, as our Lord's words clearly imply, Nineveh wouldn't have repented at all. And here lies the twist to the tale ('tail'?). For Jonah had enjoyed the hospitality of the great fish as a direct result – and only as a result – of his own disobedience to God's revealed will!

It follows necessarily, therefore, that, as an essential part of His own sovereign purpose, the Lord had over-ruled Jonah's wilful disobedience to secure the repentance, and thereby salvation, of the 'great' city for which He, the Lord, had felt great pity.

Poor Jonah. At the outset, he had *suspected* that the Lord intended to use him as His instrument to spare Nineveh from a well-deserved judgement. But what Jonah had no way of knowing then was that God would bring this about as a result of his blatant disobedience to the commission God gave him! And I suspect that part of the reason for his hot anger in chapter 4 (v. 1) was his realization that he had been so brilliantly outwitted and out-manoeuvred by the God whose very purpose he had sought to frustrate and thwart.<sup>23</sup>

I repeat – Do I understand it? You must be joking! Do I believe it? Does it fill me with a sense of awe and wonder? Indeed it does!

I believe then that God *did* overrule David's flight to the Philistines, not only for David's own good, but for the long-term good of God's people Israel – in that, whereas Saul and his three sons (including crown-prince Jonathan) were removed in death, the life of David (God's chosen king, and the one through whom, in His time, God's Messiah was to come) was preserved. Nonetheless, David's flight was, I believe, in itself a shameful and sinful action springing from his unbelief and spiritual forgetfulness. And, as I said when we were considering chapter 27, 'I can find no evidence that David composed any psalms during the entire sixteen months which he spent at Gath and Ziklag – not even of praise for the Lord's goodness to him'.

At the risk of jumping the gun a little, perhaps we should note in passing that, although – as we discover in the next chapter – David's action in going down to the Philistines led him to endanger the families and possessions of his men, in the event David recovered *all ... and* secured sufficient additional spoil to send gifts to all those who had been his friends and supporters when he had been in hiding from Saul. So even that *seemingly* ill effect of his decision can be said to have turned out, under God's hand and with His help, for the good of all in the long run.

What a wonderful, awesome and compassionate God we worship and serve!

**Pick up the lessons :**

**Verse 3.** We compared the words used by Achish about David, 'I have found no fault in him', with the words used by Pilate about 'the Son of David' – of whom he said, three times, 'I find no fault in him' – and noted the stark difference that, whereas Achish's assessment of David rested on David's deception, contrary to the charge laid against Him by the Jews, the Lord Jesus, was no 'deceiver'. Let us determine to imitate Him of whom Peter wrote – who left 'us an example, that we should follow his steps, who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth', 1 Pet. 2. 21-22.

**Verse 11.** David had clearly hoped to exploit his present situation and to throw himself into the forthcoming battle on the side of Saul and Israel. But, like David, we are not always permitted to do what we want – even when we perceive it as an opportunity of serving God and His cause. Sometimes we are most needed back home.

**Closing remarks.** We noted the merciful and timely intervention of God's providence, by means of which, in spite of David's ambition to fight at Jezreel, David was compelled to go back home just at the right moment to enable him to recover his wives and property from the Amalekites. God knew best – and He still knows best! 'Professor E. C. Caldwell ended his lecture. 'Tomorrow', he told his class of seminary students, "I will be teaching on Romans 8. So tonight, as you study, pay special attention to verse 28. Notice what this verse truly says, and what it doesn't say". Then he added, "One final word before I dismiss you—whatever happens in all the years to come, remember: Romans 8. 28 will always hold true". That same day Dr. Caldwell and his wife met with a tragic car-train accident. She was killed instantly and he was crippled permanently. Months later, Professor Caldwell returned to his students, who clearly remembered his last words. The room was hushed as he began his lecture. 'Romans 8. 28', he said, 'still holds true. One day we shall see God's good, even in this'. (Our Daily Bread, 19 December 1991.) May God give us grace to rest in His promise and to trust Him even when we cannot understand His ways with us.

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## End-notes

<sup>1</sup> 'The Front' is, of course, used here in the military sense of the scene of the actual fighting. That is, in the same sense in which it was used in the now-famous World War II newspaper headline concerning General Douglas MacArthur, '*MacArthur flies back to front!*'

<sup>2</sup> This is the view taken by Ronald Youngblood, Thomas Constable, the Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, the IVP New Bible Dictionary, and the IVP Bible Background Commentary – over against Delitzsch, Gill, and JFB. The Smith's Revised Bible Dictionary leaves the identification open.

<sup>3</sup> The Valley (or, Plain) of Jezreel runs, on the west, into the Valley (or Plain) of Esdraelon (the Greek word for Jezreel). Although I note that some scholars and commentators use either the word 'Esdraelon' or 'Jezreel' to cover the combined eastern and western Valleys. This is true, for example, of the articles 'Esdraelon' in both 'Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary' and Smith's Revised Bible Dictionary' – over against which see the article 'Esdraelon' in the IVP 'New Bible Dictionary'; 'The vale of Jezreel proper is the valley that slopes down from the town of Jezreel to Beth-shan overlooking the Jordan rift-valley, with Galilee to the north and Mt Gilboa to the south'. Alas, it all makes for confusion in the mind of the simple Bible student!

<sup>4</sup> See the note on 1 Sam. 28. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Contrast the Lord's words concerning Saul, 'he will appoint him captains over thousands, and *captains over fifties*; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest', 1 Sam. 8. 12 – and the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 1, 'I took the chief of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and *captains over fifties, and captains over tens*, and officers among your tribes', Deut. 1.15. It seems clear that both passages are concerned with non-military situations. ('The captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds' in the days of Moses are said to be 'the officers of the host ... which came from the battle', Num. 31. 14.)

<sup>6</sup> This is the word found in Josh. 13.3; Judg. 3.3; 16.5, 8, 18, 23, 27, 30; 1 Sam. 5. 8, 11; 6. 4, 12, 16, 18; 7.7; 1 Chron. 16.9 – only ever of Philistines.

<sup>7</sup> See Josh. 13. 3; Judg. 3. 3; 1 Sam. 6. 16, 18, and compare 'five golden emerods, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines', 1 Sam. 6. 4. Also see NIDOTTE number 6249, vol. 3, pages 295-297.

<sup>8</sup> There were also men of Gad, Benjamin and Judah who, according to 1 Chron. 12. 8-18, joined themselves to David while he was 'in the stronghold in the wilderness', vv. 8, 16. This was probably the stronghold at Adullam, 1 Sam. 22. 4. The addition of this contingent no doubt explained some of the increase in the number of David's men from 'four hundred', 1 Sam. 22. 2, to 'about six hundred', 23. 13.

I cannot see that the 'stronghold' was not the later one at Zion, 2 Sam. 5. 7, 17, because 1 Chron. 12 seems to be clearly divided at v. 23. The statement that 'day by day there came to David to help him, until it was a great host, like the host of God', v. 22, functions as a summary of all who came to augment David's forces between his going to Adullam, 22. 4, and his being anointed king over Israel. 1 Chron. 22. 23-40 gives a detailed register of those who came to transfer the kingdom to him. That is, a reference to 'stronghold' in verses 8 and 16 could not then be reference to Zion which was not captured until after David's anointing as king over all Israel; 2 Sam. 5. 1-3, 6-9.

It seems to me unlikely that the 'stronghold' was one of the strong holds in Ziph, 23. 14, 19, or that at En-gedi, 23. 29, because the numbers implied in 1 Chron. 12. 8-18, together with known increases of vv. 1-7 and vv. 19-21 – totalling 34 – are hardly consistent with the statement that David's men already numbered about six hundred before his arrival at Ziph, vv. 13, 15.

The latter part of 1 Chron. 12. 14 is literally translated, 'one, the small, for a hundred, and the greater for a thousand'. This should probably be understood as a hyperbole, meaning that the very least Gadite – the smaller/weaker was equal to a hundred opponents, and the greatest/strongest was equal to a thousand – or that they were worth 100/1000 ordinary men, or, possibly, that they could defeat 100/1000 opponents. Either this, or, just possibly, the verse looks on to the time when David was king and is saying that he *then* made them captains of these numbers of men.

The strength and courage of these Gadite warriors is further evidenced by their crossing the Jordan in the first month during spring flooding (see Josh 3. 15) and their defeating everyone living in the valleys both to the east and to the west, v. 15. The Holy Spirit no doubt lavished these praises on the Gadites to emphasise that the very best of this tribe joined David at the stronghold.

<sup>9</sup> See NIDOTTE, numbers 1518 and 1522, volume 1, pages 821-822.

<sup>10</sup> See the notes at 28. 2, together with End-note 4.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb in '*Israel: From Conquest to Exile*', BMH Books, page 260.

<sup>12</sup> Almost 420 times if I have counted accurately.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Sam. 4. 6, 9; 13. 19; 14. 11. The title 'Hebrew' was not only commonly used by non-Israelites as a synonym for 'Israelite', but also by those of Israel themselves and even by the Lord – see Exod. 21. 2; Deut. 15. 12; Jer. 34. 9, 14; Phil. 3. 5. It seems likely that the Philistine cities had been originally settled as colonies of mercenaries recruited from the Sea Peoples defeated in the eighth year of Ramses III, and that their subsequent domination resulted when the collapse of Egyptian influence in Canaan left the five Philistine fortress cities independent. As successors to what had been Egyptian territory, they may have been heirs to the Egyptian attitude

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to the despised 'bunch from the hinterland', whom they had called 'Hebrews' – see Gen. 39. 14, 17; 41. 12; Exod. 1. 15-19.

<sup>14</sup> The regular word for deserting and going over to the other side. See 2 Kings 25.11; Jer. 21.9; 37.13; 38.19; 39.9; 52.15.

<sup>15</sup> The word 'Satan'; compare its use in the plural by David in 2 Sam. 19. 22.

<sup>16</sup> An expression stemming from the reference made to such support by General Mola in besieged Madrid in 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Mr Darby's New Translation. 'After consultation', NASB.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Sam. 24. 8; 26. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Compare David's earlier ambiguous words, 'David said to Achish, Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do', 28. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel's words in chapters 15 and 28 made it clear that, as a result of Saul's disobedience, God willed the death of Saul – and along with that, and as a result of that same disobedience, in part at least, the defeat of Israel.

I say 'in part at least' because there is evidence that Israel's defeat was due in part to their *own* sinfulness. I acknowledge that we are not told much of the people's spiritual condition directly in the second half of 1 Samuel. But Saul's words to Samuel in chapter 15 may give some indication of this: '*the people* spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God ... I have ... brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But *the people* took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God', 15. 15, 20-21. Note, 'the people spared ... the people took'. That the people were themselves guilt along with Saul is made clear by the Holy Spirit's words in v. 9, 'But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen' etc. It has to be said, of course, that, though Saul's soldiers or the people more generally may have been immediately responsible for sparing the Amalekites' animals, as the leader and head of his people, Saul was ultimately responsible for their behaviour – and, as such, had no right to shift the blame onto them. But the point remains. If the people did play such a prominent role in what happened – and I note that Samuel does not contest these bits of what Saul said – it betrays something of the people's poor spiritual state. It may also have exposed them to the same judgement of God as fell on Saul himself – namely that of being slain later.

I suggest that we have to bear in mind Samuel's final address to the nation at the time of the ratifying of the covenant at Gilgal. He then spelt out to them, 'If ye will fear the Lord, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the Lord your God: but if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers. ... if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king', 12. 14-15, 25. In these words, Samuel made it clear to Israel that their future destiny rested largely upon their own spiritual response to God and His word.

It is possible then that, as in the case of Saul himself, the people had 'obeyed not the voice of the Lord and rebelled against the Lord's commandment', and so, in no small part, were responsible themselves for their defeat at Jezreel. I suggest that it wouldn't be fair therefore to attribute Israel's crushing defeat exclusively to Saul. Is it coincidence, I ask, that the very same language is used by Samuel when addressing the people in chapter 12 (of 'not obeying the voice of the Lord' and failing to keep 'the commandment of the Lord') as he used of Saul's great sins in chapters 13 and 15?<sup>20</sup> Were the people affected by the spiritual condition of their 'leader'? And is this therefore an evidence that the spiritual condition of God's people rarely rises above the spiritual condition of their leaders? But whether or not the people of Israel themselves were blameless – and it does seem that they weren't – it is clear from Samuel's words in chapters 15 and 28 that their fate at Mount Gilboa was very much tied up with that of their king.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Peter's words in Acts 2. 23.

<sup>22</sup> See '*The Sign of Jonah*', by Eugene Merrill in *JETS* 23/1 (March 1980) 23-30 – from which the following is an extract, 'Since the Lord Jesus, according to both Matthew and Luke, spoke of Jonah as constituting in himself a sign to ancient Nineveh, a sign so persuasive that the population from king to peasant repented, something in Jonah's experience must be found to provide adequate explanation for his effectiveness. In Matthew attention is drawn to Jonah's having been in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, but since Luke specifies that Jonah was a sign to Nineveh that experience in the fish must have been communicated to the Assyrian capital and have become to the Ninevites a sign that Jonah was a divine messenger. Such a sign would be particularly convincing to a people whose aetiology [the philosophy of causation] taught them that their city had been founded by a fish-god. The spectacular and timely arrival of Jonah among them created a curiosity and receptivity to his message that would have been possible in no other way. When the truth of the message of Yahweh was then proclaimed, the response was the repentance and faith recounted in the sacred text'. The sign of Jonah of Jonah consists 'in the authorization of the divine messenger by deliverance from death', TDNT, vol. III, page 409. 'Jonah himself ... served as a "sign" to the Ninevites, for he appeared to them as one who had been delivered from certain death', Don Carson on Matt. 12. 40 in the Expositor's Bible Commentary.

<sup>23</sup> See the relevant section of my exposition of '*The Prophecy of Jonah*' on pages 110-112 in '*The Minor Prophets*', Precious Seed Publications, 1992.