

The Weight of the Crown

On the Run

1 Samuel 23-24

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Afterward David also arose and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage. And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your harm'? Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes wickedness.' But my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea! May the LORD therefore be judge and give sentence between me and you, and see to it and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand." As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." And David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold (1 Sam. 24:8-22, ESV).

One of my favorite verses in the Psalms is from chapter 55. I love its honesty and how it captures what we feel when discouraged:

Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest (Ps. 55:6).

There's an understandable human instinct to flee. Perhaps you are aware of the fight-flight-freeze response that describes how we respond to danger or the anticipation of something harmful. When hurtful people or circumstances come our way, we want relief. And connected to that desire are strong desires and emotional responses.

Most of us have a typical, go-to response. Two examples to get you thinking: (1) Sarah and I have had to talk about how she identifies danger when I'm driving. Her "go-to" is just to repeatedly say my name. "Mark, Mark, Mark!" But instead I need her to point out where the danger is. (2) My wife needs me to use more words. The other night, I was looking at my phone and said, "Oh no!" She asked me repeatedly, "What's wrong?" I was thinking, and I didn't answer. She was understandably upset when I told her that I didn't understand the rules of Wordle.

Seriously, though, what's your go-to response when:

- You're uncertain.
- You're waiting.
- You're misunderstood.
- You're treated unfairly.
- You're betrayed.

Here's another question: What is your spiritual strategy when those things happen? In other words, what is God's role in your life when you want to fight, flee, or freeze?

As you heard last week in Jeff Ballard's sermon, we're at the point in 1 Samuel where we not only get to look at what is happening *to* David, we also get a glimpse of what is happening *in* him as we look at some of the Psalms that were likely written during this time of his life.

While we look at 1 Samuel 23-24, we are also going to keep our eyes on Psalms 54 and 63. There are two verses in Psalms 54 and 63 that are remarkably similar:

- *Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life* (Ps. 54:4).
- *... for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me* (Ps. 63:7-8).

When you want to fight, flee, or freeze, keep this in mind: ***"God is my helper and upholder."***

Let's see how this plays out in David's life in 1 Samuel 23-24.

Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life (Ps. 54:4).

Chapter 23 records two challenging moments in David's life. One relates to uncertainty. The other relates to betrayal. And we see a beautiful story here of the way that God helps and upholds David, but also how David connects his life circumstances to those divine realities.

In verses 1-14, we read the account of David's deliverance of the city Keilah. The Philistines were harassing the people in the city and taking away their grain. A central part of this story is David's regular communication with the Lord. In verse 2, he asks the Lord if he should attack, and God affirms it. However, the people following David are afraid (v. 3). The city of Keilah was near the border of the

Philistines. This kind of attack could create a significant blowback. So, David inquired of the Lord again, and he received divine affirmation.

And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah (1 Sam. 23:5).

The victory doesn't last long because when Saul learns that David is in Keilah, he incorrectly believes that God has delivered David into his hands (v. 7). He musters an army to attack David and trap him in the city (v. 8). Somehow David learns about these plans, and he calls for Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod, a breastplate worn by priests that included the Urim and Thummim. Once again, David inquires of the Lord as to whether Saul will actually attack him and if the people will surrender him to Saul (vv. 10-12). The Lord affirms that both will happen. David and his men flee: "wherever they could go." (v. 13)

The conclusion to this section is found in verse 14:

And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand (1 Sam. 23:14).

Now, keep the wilderness of Ziph in your head because we'll come back to it. But notice how God helped David. Through prayer and intercession, the Lord directed his steps, even in uncertainty.

In verses 15-29, we find another situation. This time, however, it's related to betrayal. According to verse 15, David is living in the wilderness of Ziph, and he's still on the run from Saul. Somehow Jonathan is able to find David, and they meet at Horesh. They make a covenant together with a vision of serving together when David becomes king (vv. 16-17).

While David is living in this region, a group of Ziphites betray David's location to Saul (vv. 19-20). They inform Saul that David is hiding in the strongholds of Horesh. Saul sends the Ziphites back to confirm David's location (vv. 21-24). David and his men take refuge in the wilderness of Maon, near a landmark called "the rock" (v. 25).

Saul continues his pursuit, and at one point Saul is on one side of the mountain, while David is on the other side. Verse 26 says, "David was hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his men were closing in on David to capture them." The point here is for you as the reader to see how close David was to being captured. And then God intervened as a messenger arrived with news about a new Philistine invasion (v. 27).

This section ends with an important statement in verses 28-29:

So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape. And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi (1 Sam. 23:28-29).

Now, we've heard about the wilderness of Ziph and Maon. Those are pretty vast and generic locations that are remote. We're not entirely sure where they are, but we do know about the wilderness of Engedi. It's very close to the Dead Sea, and it's incredibly desolate, isolated, and dry. Engedi (which means fountain of the kid-goat) was a rare oasis of water in the harsh landscape of the Dead Sea basin.

And it's in that environment and under these circumstances that David writes Psalm 54. This is one of the fifty laments in Psalms where God's people talk to God in pain to help them trust him. This is David's heartfelt prayer when he's on the run.

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A MASKIL OF DAVID, WHEN THE ZIPHITES WENT AND TOLD SAUL, "IS NOT DAVID HIDING AMONG US?" O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth. For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves. Selah

Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them. With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies (Psalm 54).

It's a stunning prayer, isn't it? I wonder how many people deeply resonate with what it's like to be uncertain, fearful, attacked, and betrayed. I wonder how many are living in a functional wilderness right now. Instead of fighting, fleeing, or freezing, I invite you to embrace these words: "God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life."

David is on the run, yet he's still trusting and worshipping: "I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good!" I wonder how many of us need to pray the same thing today?

...for you have been my help . . . your right hand upholds me (Ps. 63:7-8).

The next story relates to the way the Lord is with David while he embraces patience and waits for the Lord's timing in becoming king. Since we know that David became king at age thirty, it's likely that he waited for 10 to 15 years between being anointed and assuming the throne.

In 1 Samuel 24, we have the story of David sparing Saul's life. Chapter 24 begins by telling us (again) that David is in Engedi. Saul began pursuing him again with three thousand men (v. 2). Remember that David has about six hundred men. It's meant to be an overwhelming force.

In a comical twist, Saul steps into a nearby cave to "relieve himself" (a.k.a. use the bathroom). The KJV translated this as "cover his feet" which is a literal translation. That led my Sunday School teachers to present this story as Saul taking a nap. Well, not quite. Without being crass, it is important to understand here that Saul is in a vulnerable position. He has no idea that further back in the cave David and his men are hiding (v. 4).

David's men encourage him to take action. They see this moment as an opportunity from the Lord and that Saul has been delivered into David's hands. They even quote or paraphrase what David heard from the Lord previously about the Philistines in 23:4. David was an experienced soldier, and with a quick blow, his days of running could be over. All that stands between him and the throne is a decisive thrust of his sword.

According to verse 4, David quietly cut off a corner of Saul's robe. Did he change his mind as he approached Saul? Was this his plan all along? Was he grandstanding a bit for his men? We're not sure. But we do know that David regretted his decision.

David's men were ready to finish the job and kill Saul. But David says something important to them and persuades them not to take any action.

He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6).

This is an instructive moment to consider, and it runs contrary to the spirit of our age. David's respect for the king's position and his trust in God's sovereignty are evident. I realize this is a complex issue more broadly, but it's helpful to see someone live out their faith while under pressure and still have respect for God-given authority. I know that authority figures can and do abuse their authority. Tyranny and leadership abuse are real. But we live in a day where authority and the honoring of it are at (in my lifetime) an all-time low. Now, there's probably understandable reasons for that. Yet Exodus 22:28 still says, "You shall not revile God nor curse a ruler of your people." And 1 Timothy 2:1 says, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions."

Our pastors and elders have just started reading Jonathan Leeman's new book *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing*. He writes,

*"The topic of authority takes us right to the heart of who God is, and how he means for us to image him. What you think about authority...reveals quite a bit about what you think about God."*¹

After Saul departs from the cave, David calls out to him. In verses 9-15, David appeals to the king. Listen to the heart of this future king:

And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your harm'? Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my

¹ Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing*, (Crossway: Wheaton), 13-14, 2023.

hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes wickedness.' But my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea! May the LORD therefore be judge and give sentence between me and you, and see to it and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand" (1 Sam. 24:9-15).

And for a moment, it appears as though Saul is broken.

As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house (1 Sam. 24:16-21).

Saul's attitude will change back to hostility in future chapters. This isn't over for David. But we do get a glimpse of David's trust in God while navigating this complicated situation.

Interestingly, our text ends with "then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold." This is the Hebrew word *mesuda*/*masada*. It's very likely that David took up residence in what we know today as Masada, a high natural platform on which Herod built a fortress and the place where nine hundred Jewish rebels fled the Romans in 73 AD, surviving a several months'long siege.

While we're not sure where David wrote Psalm 63, we know it was in the wilderness. Maybe it was here.

A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDAH. O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; they shall be given over to the power of the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped (Psalm 63).

So let me come back to the original question: What's your go-to response when you want to fight, freeze, or flee?

Can I remind you that the Lord Jesus is always with you? He invites you to come to him. I want to remind you that he's your helper and upholder. When you are uncertain, waiting, misunderstood, unfairly treated, or betrayed, remember ". . . my soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."

When you want to fight, flee, or freeze, that's the time to embrace faith.

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