

# Repaying Evil with Good

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

August 9, 2009

©2009 Scott L. Engle

*1 Samuel 26:6-25 (NRSV)*

<sup>6</sup>Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, "Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?" Abishai said, "I will go down with you." <sup>7</sup>So David and Abishai went to the army by night; there Saul lay sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him. <sup>8</sup>Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice." <sup>9</sup>But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the LORD's anointed, and be guiltless?" <sup>10</sup>David said, "As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish. <sup>11</sup>The LORD forbid that I should raise my hand against the LORD's anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go." <sup>12</sup>So David took the spear that was at Saul's head and the water jar, and they went away. No one saw it, or knew it, nor did anyone awake; for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen upon them.

<sup>13</sup>Then David went over to the other side, and stood on top of a hill far away, with a great distance between them. <sup>14</sup>David called to the army and to Abner son of Ner, saying, "Abner! Will you not answer?" Then Abner replied, "Who are you that calls to the king?" <sup>15</sup>David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy your lord the king. <sup>16</sup>This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the LORD's anointed. See now, where is the king's spear, or the water jar that was at his head?"

<sup>17</sup>Saul recognized David's voice, and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" David said, "It is my voice, my lord, O king." <sup>18</sup>And he added, "Why does my lord pursue his servant? For what have I done? What guilt is on my hands? <sup>19</sup>Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out today from my share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' <sup>20</sup>Now therefore, do not let my blood fall to the ground, away from the presence of the LORD; for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea, like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains."

<sup>21</sup>Then Saul said, "I have done wrong; come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake." <sup>22</sup>David replied, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and get it. <sup>23</sup>The LORD rewards everyone for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD gave you into my hand today, but I would not raise my hand against the LORD's anointed. <sup>24</sup>As your life was precious today in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the LORD, and may he rescue me from all tribulation." <sup>25</sup>Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

*Which path to take? Which choice to make? David has been hunted by a man bent on killing him. Now, he has the chance to turn the tables and kill the hunter. What will he do, this man chosen by God for his heart?*

Several years ago, I noticed a billboard on the side of the highway. Erected by a local church, it read, "We are defined by our dreams." Though well-intentioned, I think the sentiment expressed on the billboard is wrong. We are not defined by our dreams; instead, we are defined by our choices, by what we do, by the many decisions we make throughout our lives. Sometimes the choice we make is small and has few consequences. Sometimes the choice is obviously important, carrying enormous consequences. Perhaps the trickiest choices are the ones that seem so trivial at the time, but can actually change the direction of our lives. The Bible is filled with stories of

people and the choices they make – some small, some eternal. In today’s story, David faces a potentially life-changing choice.

### *A book of choices*

Sometimes it almost seems that God gave us the wrong sort of book. We want the Bible to be a magic answer book that we can turn to for an answer to any question we face in life. But it is not. Sometimes we want the Bible to tell us, in plain and organized

#### Abner

Abner is an important person in the stories of Saul and David. Here is the entry on Abner from the Easton’s Bible Dictionary.

Abner’s name means “father of light; i.e., “enlightening.” He was the son of Ner and uncle of Saul. He was commander-in-chief of Saul’s army (1 Sam. 14:50; 17:55; 20:25). He first introduced David to the court of Saul after the victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17:57). After the death of Saul, David was made king over Judah, and reigned in Hebron. Among the other tribes there was a feeling of hostility to Judah; and Abner, at the head of Ephraim, fostered this hostility in the interest of the house of Saul, whose son Ishbaal he caused to be proclaimed king (2 Sam. 2:8). A state of war existed between Ishbaal and David. Abner, who was the leader of Ishbaal’s army, fought and lost a battle with David’s army under Joab at Gibeon (2 Sam. 2:12). Abner, escaping from the field, was overtaken by Asahel, who was “light of foot as a wild roe,” the brother of Joab and Abishai, whom Abner thrust through with a back stroke of his spear (2 Sam. 2:18–32).

Being rebuked by Ishbaal for the impropriety of marrying Rizpah, who had been a concubine of King Saul, Abner found an excuse for going over to the side of David, whom he now professed to regard as anointed by the Lord to reign over all Israel. David received him favorably, and promised that he would have command of the armies. At this time Joab was absent from Hebron, but on his return he found what had happened. Abner had just left the city; but Joab by a stratagem recalled him, and meeting him at the gate of the city on his return, thrust him through with his sword (2 Sam. 3:27, 31–39; 4:12. Comp. 1 Kings 2:5, 32). David lamented deeply the death of Abner, “Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?” (2 Sam. 3:38.)

language, everything we’d like to know about God, like some sort of systematic theology textbook. But it is not. The Bible is a book of stories. Some large, some small. It is through these stories that we learn about God and ourselves. By stepping into these stories we can begin to truly become part of God’s life, not simply make him part of ours. The Bible is God’s word for God’s people and the spiritual journal of God’s people, telling the story of a journey driven forward by the choices that God and we make.

God *chooses* a people. God *chooses* to love them. God *chooses* to pursue them even when they turn their backs on him. Abraham *chooses* to obey God, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his own son, though God, in the end, didn’t ask that of him. Sarah, Abraham’s wife, *chooses* to take matters into her own hands rather than trust God’s promise that he will give them a child. She sends a servant girl in to get pregnant by Abraham. The only mystery in the book of Job is whether Job will *choose* to continue to trust in God, despite the most horrible and inexplicable tragedies being thrust upon him. When Joshua sends a couple of scouts into Canaan, a prostitute named Rahab must decide whether to give them aid and information. She *chooses* well. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter must *choose* whether to proclaim his allegiance to his Lord. He *chooses* poorly. Later, Stephen must *choose* whether to deny Christ or face death. He *chooses* well.

#### *The heart’s choice*

God chooses David as King Saul’s successor. Why David? Because, we’re told, God looks at the heart, not at outward appearances. And as we’ve moved through the stories we’ve seen some evidence of David’s heart, but, to be honest, there really hasn’t been much that helps us see in David what God must have seen.

Perhaps that is why today’s story, and its parallel two chapters earlier (1 Samuel 24), are given so much attention in Scripture. (The page 4 text box

will take you through the story in 1 Samuel 24). These are both lengthy and detailed narratives.

The parallels between the two stories are striking. In each, David is offered the chance to kill Saul who has been relentlessly hunting for David. In each story, David refuses to kill Saul, telling his men: “Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the LORD’s anointed, and be guiltless?” In each story, Saul knows that he has been spared and David pleads his innocence and his confusion as to why Saul is after him at all. Both stories are long, detailed, and poignant.

Indeed, the stories are so similar that, though one is set in a cave and one in Saul’s camp, biblical scholars are divided as to whether the stories actually recount two separate incidents or are two variations of a single story about David.

Yet, there are some key differences as well. The chapter 24 story ends with Saul seeming to understand exactly where this is all going, saying, “I now know beyond a doubt that you

### Forgiveness

Saul has hunted down David with one goal in mind – eliminating the threat to his throne. When David has the chance to eliminate the threat to himself, he chooses the path of forgiveness. Such a difficult path, and sadly, such a rare path in the halls of power.

David has learned that forgiveness is the way of God. His actions even foreshadow Jesus’ teaching to Peter that he is to forgive seventy times seven, i.e., without limit.

Here we see the heart in David that God saw. David has learned that forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out.

In the story just prior to today’s, David sets out to wreak vengeance but is saved from his blood lust by a woman named Abigail. Now, David breathes out the forgiveness that he breathed in not long before.

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: ‘God’s forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.’

Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

will rule as king. The kingdom of God is already in your grasp” (1 Sam 24:20, *The Message*). Not so with the story in chapter 26. Also, God plays a more prominent role in the second story. In chapter 26, David and Abishai are able to sneak into Saul’s camp, make their way to where he is sleeping, and take Saul’s spear and water jug – all without waking a single person! How? God has put the whole camp into a deep sleep.

One incident or two? As is so often the case with such questions, I don’t think it much matters. Even if it is two variations of a single encounter between David and Saul, the stories reveal something profound about David’s heart and the choice he makes here. There’s a reason that the writers and editors of the book of Samuel spent a long time on these stories.

### *Choosing God’s way*

Put simply, David chooses the path of forgiveness and non-violence. In this way, he prepares us for Jesus who, a millennium later, teaches the way of unlimited forgiveness.

David will not harm Saul, the man anointed by God to be the first king of Israel, even though David’s forgiveness endangers his own life. Bear in mind, in the ancient world, assassination of sitting rulers was commonplace. David’s men recognize that their commander has been offered a rare chance to fix a big problem – permanently.

But David rejects the ways of worldly power and opportunity. Instead, he embraces peace, at this place, for this moment. Despite the many sins of David before and after, his forgiveness of Saul is a window into David’s heart and his very much imperfect commitment to *choosing* God’s way.

## The Parallel Story – 1 Samuel 24

1 Samuel 24 is a story very similar to the story in chapter 26. Here is a synopsis:

Saul has twice tried to kill David in the royal palace and is now marching throughout the wilderness hunting down David and his men. Saul is determined to eliminate his perceived rival. David is running for his life.

One day, David and his men are resting in the back of a cave. They notice that someone has entered the cave to relieve himself. But it's not just anyone. It is Saul! Can you imagine the astonished reaction among David's men as they sit quietly in the back of the cave. God was delivering David's enemy right into their hands. The hunter had become not just the hunted, but the helpless.

David's men are ready to pounce, but he holds them back. Instead, David crawls along the side of the cave to where Saul has tossed his robe so he can go about his business. David cuts off a piece of the royal robe and then crawls back to his men. They figure that the time has come to fall on Saul and bring a quick end to their struggle. After all, it can't be mere coincidence that Saul has chosen this cave. God is handing him over on a silver platter. Who in their right mind would let Saul simply walk out of the cave?

But David's heart is stricken by the act of cutting the royal robe. Such brazenness is a humiliation to Saul and, David thinks to himself, who am I to lift even a hand against God's anointed? David then scolds his men for wanting to kill Saul and they let Saul walk out of the cave.

While Saul is still within earshot, David steps out of the cave. He calls out to Saul and falls to the ground, bowing before the man who wants him dead. David pleads with Saul. Who is telling Saul that David is against him? David then lifts up the piece of robe to show Saul that David had foregone the opportunity to kill Saul.

To the reader of the book of Samuel, David's sparing of Saul isn't really all that surprising. When Samuel had come to anoint God's choice for the next king of Israel, God had passed on the good-looking older brother, and instead chose young David. God told Samuel, "for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

What is surprising is that Saul, in a rare moment, expresses his own remorse. "You are more righteous than I," he exclaims. "When a man finds his enemy," Saul says, "does he let him get away unharmed?" If the man is David, the answer is yes, at least on this occasion. At other times, forgiveness seems a long way from David's heart.

Before they part ways, Saul asks a favor from David. Saul seems to know where this confrontation is headed, saying, "I know that you will surely be king . . . now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendents or wipe out my name from my father's family." David gives his oath to Saul and the two men head back to their war.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. David's choice in this story is obviously consequential. But sometimes in life, choices that seem very important at the time turn out to be pretty inconsequential. What are some decisions you've made in your own life that seemed huge at the time, but in hindsight, really weren't very significant? On the other hand, sometimes small choices sneak up on us and we fail to see the consequences of our decision? What are some examples, from your own life, of small decisions that turned out to have big consequences?
2. Some people have a view of life in which they have little control over what happens to them. Every choice, every consequence, is thrust on them from the outside, even from God. Other people believe that they are in control of nearly every part of their life – their future is a direct consequence of their own decisions. What is your own view? How much control do you have over your life? Has your perspective on this changed? What do you think the biblical view is?
3. The biblical perspective is that making better choices begins with God. Do you really agree? Aren't there lots of moral and ethical people who don't acknowledge God? What difference does God really make? If making better choices begins with God, why do so many of God's people make such terrible choices? What evidence is there of God at work in our own choices?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings, we'll begin reading through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and even into 1 Kings as we go through the entire David narrative.

<p><b>Monday, 2 Samuel 2:12-32</b> David sits on the throne of Judah and now is at war with the other tribes and Saul's son.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 2 Samuel 3</b> The war is a long one but goes David's way. Abner, who defects to David's side is assassinated by Joab, though David doesn't know that Joab is the killer.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Samuel 4</b> Saul's son, Ishbaal (or Ishbosheth) is assassinated, though David is not involved in and even executes the murderers.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 2 Samuel 5:1-16</b> David becomes king of the united tribes and conquers Jerusalem, making it his capital.</p>
<p><b>Friday, 2 Samuel 5:17-25</b> Guess who is back! David goes to war with the Philistines and defeats them.</p>	<p><b>Saturday, 2 Samuel 6</b> David brings the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. This will be the last heard from Michal, David's first wife.</p>

## *Dysfunction Junction:*

### **Flawed families of the Bible**

#### **The current series in Scott's 11:00 Sunday class**

There is certainly no shortage of biblical stories about flawed families. Time after time, we see families that look far too much like our own. Yet, with a discerning eye, we can also see God's grace at work in these imperfect relationships. Join us as we look at stories ranging from two sisters' baby-making competition to a father's tragic vow to God.

Aug 9: Silent Shame – Dinah's story

Aug 16 – Committing to Family Against All Odds – Tamar's Story

## **Encounter**

*a time for fellowship, worship, and learning*

Are you ready for a life with God that makes a real difference? Would you like to develop a passion for Scripture? Would you like to make new friends in a casual, Christian setting? The time has come . . . **Encounter** is coming to St. Andrew, beginning September 9 at 6:45 in Wesley Hall.

Featuring the music of Jodi Wright, the teaching of Scott Engle, and the pastoral leadership of Rev. Steve Robertson, **Encounter** will be a Wednesday evening time for connecting with God, his word, and one another. Each week, we'll worship together with fresh and engaging music. We'll encounter God's word in an innovative time of teaching and preaching, beginning with the Gospel of Mark. We'll make new friends and share our joys and concerns. Each week . . . Every week.

We'll be offering a children's program, as well as childcare for the littlest ones. We are even going to make meals available at 5:30 in Youth Common, much like last fall's popular "Soup for the Soul."

Whatever you think this is . . . well, it is probably a bit different.  
You'll have to come see for yourself!

### **Sermon Notes**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---