

After God's Own Heart

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-week series

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1 Samuel 24 (NIV)

After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." ² So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crag of the Wild Goats.

³ He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. ⁴ The men said, "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe.

⁵ Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. ⁶ He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the LORD." ⁷ With these words David sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way.

⁸ Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. ⁹ He said to Saul, "Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you'?" ¹⁰ This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD's anointed.' ¹¹ See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. ¹² May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. ¹³ As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you.

¹⁴ "Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?" ¹⁵ May the LORD be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand."

¹⁶ When David finished saying this, Saul asked, "Is that your voice, David my son?" And he wept aloud. ¹⁷ "You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. ¹⁸ You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the LORD delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. ¹⁹ When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today. ²⁰ I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. ²¹ Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family."

²² So David gave his oath to Saul. Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

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?

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 to 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. The truth is that at other times (one chapter later in the story!), 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 descendants 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.

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 later (1 Samuel 26), are given so much attention in Scripture. 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 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 on 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, on that day, 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.

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 after today's, David sets out to wreak vengeance for an insult, but is saved from his blood lust by a woman named Abigail. One day, David breathes out forgiveness; another day, he breathes it in. So it is with us all.

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.

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, small choices often 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.

Monday, 1 Samuel 25 David, Abigail, and Nabal	Tuesday, 1 Samuel 28: 3-25 In desperation, Saul turns to a medium.
Wednesday, 1 Samuel 31 Jonathan dies in battle and Saul takes his own life rather than be captured.	Thursday, 2 Samuel 5:1-13 David becomes the king over a reunited Israel and conquers Jerusalem, making it his city.
Friday, 1 Samuel 7 God makes a everlasting promise to David.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying 2 Samuel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Hebrews

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our Current Series:

The Gospel According to Hollywood

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
