

THE POINT DAVID MADE WITH SAUL'S SPEAR

INTRODUCTION

This is the last of the seven chapters of 1 Samuel occupied with Saul's enmity towards David – and it closes with the final parting of the two men. Although, as we have seen in an earlier session, there are many similarities between this chapter and chapter 24, there are also many differences – perhaps the most significant being that in chapter 24 David was on the defensive, whereas in chapter 26 he is on the offensive. In chapter 24, David had been hiding from Saul, and Saul just 'happened' to come to the place where David hid. This time, David actively seeks Saul out, and leads a night raid into his camp.

Chapter 24 was an instance of David's restraint when given an opportunity to kill Saul. Chapter 26 is a demonstration of David's ability to put himself in a position to kill him. That is, this time David is in control, not only of himself but of the situation.

It is possible that the Holy Spirit recorded the two similar incidents to reinforce the message of chapter 24. The Jews laid great store by a double testimony (in accordance with Deuteronomy 19. 15; 'at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established' – a principle carried forward to the church by the Lord and his apostles, Matt. 18. 16; 2 Cor. 13. 1; 1 Tim. 5. 19). And here for a second time (i) David resisted the temptation to harm the Lord's anointed, and (ii) Saul admitted his own wrong-doing, acknowledging that David was to have a great and illustrious future.

In our chapter, there are no less than six references to Saul's spear (vv. 7, 8, 11, 12, 16, 22) – and I therefore feel justified in heading the chapter, 'The point David made with Saul's spear'!

CHAPTER DIVISION

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EXPOSITION

Verses 1-4 The Ziphites inform on David - again

Verse 1. *'The Ziphites came unto Saul to Gibeah, saying, Doth not David hide himself in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon (the desert)?'* The reader could be excused a feeling of déjà vu at this point, because the Ziphites – the people of the city of Ziph in the hill country of Judah – had betrayed David's whereabouts to Saul on a previous occasion, 23. 19-23 – and that in more or less identical words; 'Then came up the Ziphites to Saul to Gibeah, saying, Doth not David hide himself with us in strong holds in the wood, in the hill of Hachilah, which is on the south of Jeshimon?'. Now, they attempt to gain King Saul's favour once more by helping him locate David. It is especially sad that men of Judah, David's own tribe, should be so ready to betray their future king to a man of Benjamin like Saul.

Verse 2. *'Then Saul arose, and went down to the wilderness of Ziph, having three thousand chosen men of Israel with him'.* Clearly Saul had returned home to Gibeah, having given up pursuing David, at least for a time. But the arrival and renewed offer of these helpful informers, prompted Saul to reassemble his entire standing army of 3,000 men¹ to stalk David again – going back on the assurances which he had given David at the close of chapter 24. Though Saul had then been greatly moved emotionally, his good intentions didn't last very long. His response to the offer of the men of Ziph provides a clear illustration of the principle that, if sin isn't dethroned and mortified, it will soon recover its strength, and when a suitable temptation is presented, break out again with renewed and often increased force.

We may wonder why it was that, having been betrayed previously in the wilderness of Ziph, David should have so soon ventured there again. The explanation almost certainly lies in that Ziph was near both Maon and Carmel, Josh. 15. 55 – and what more natural that David should seek refuge in the area of Maon following his marriage to Abigail, whose home was there, 25. 2-3.

Verses 3-4. *'David abode in the wilderness, and he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness. David therefore sent out spies, and understood that Saul was come in very deed'.* David therefore sent out spies: David, as wise and capable commander, constantly monitored the movements of Saul. David knew where Saul was, even if Saul didn't know where David was.

It seems as if David may have found it hard to believe that, after Saul's last words to him – speaking to him as his 'son' and expressing the wish that the Lord would reward David well for what David had done that day in sparing his life, 24. 16-21, Saul would again pursue him. But when his scouts informed him that it was really so, he went in person to the hill at night to survey Saul's encampment, and there he spotted Saul and Abner sleeping soundly in the middle of the camp.

Verses 5-12 David and Abishai venture into Saul's camp by night

Verse 5. *'David arose, and came to the place where Saul had pitched'*. On the face of it, David's action was mighty strange. Having established that Saul was 'come in very deed', v. 4, 'David arose' – but not 'and fled and/or escaped' as on eight other occasions since the beginning of chapter 19,² but rather 'and came to the place where Saul was pitched'. What was in David's mind? Perhaps encouraged by the success of his earlier speech following his, unsought and unexpected, experience in chapter 24, David apparently hoped that a repetition of the same ploy would win Saul around again. This would, at the very least, buy him some further breathing space – and just possibly lead to a permanent reconciliation. The sequel shows that David fely under enormous pressure to escape from Saul's pursuit by fleeing the land of Israel altogether to seek refuge in one of the surrounding lands. Yet this was the last thing which David wants to do; 26. 19; 27. 1. But, as David saw it, given the persistent betrayal even by men of his own tribe, what else could he do?

'Beheld the place'. The references in verse 6 to going 'down' show that David had remained on high ground. Saul's camp was 'by the way', v. 3; that is, near the road, which would have been on lower ground – compare verse 13, where David 'stood on the top of an hill afar off'.

'Saul lay in the trench, and the people pitched round about him'. The rare word translated 'camp'³ means 'wagon-wheel track' and probably refers to the tracks made by the supply wagons. The idea then is that the perimeter of Saul's camp was marked by the tracks of his wagons, and it was within the perimeter of the camp that Saul slept – seemingly safe and secure.

And so David determines to collect – not a patch from Saul's robe – but Saul's spear – the symbol of Saul's kingship and which the king apparently never let out of his sight.

Verse 6. *'David and said to Ahimelech the Hittite'*. Ahimelech the Hittite was clearly a foreign mercenary – just as was Uriah the Hittite, the husband of the Jewess Bathsheba, 2 Sam. 11. 3. Many centuries before, the Hittites had established an extremely powerful empire to the north of Syria – strong enough to threaten Assyria on one hand and Egypt on other – which had already lasted six centuries. and would for two more. This is the only time that Ahimelech is mentioned yet he was clearly one of David's close and trusted attendants.⁴

'Abishai the son of Zeruiah'. Abishai, Joab, and Asahel are consistently referred to as the sons of their mother Zeruiah rather than as the sons of their father. This may be for the obvious reason that Zeruiah was David's sister. But there may be another reason. I note that following the death of Asahael, 2 Sam. 2. 32 says that 'they took up Asahel, and buried him in the sepulcher of his father, which was in Bethlehem'. It is possible therefore that their father was already dead.

Abishai belonged to the second rank or class of David's mighty men, 2 Sam. 23. 18-23; the first class of three comprising Jashobeam, Eleazar and Shammah, 2 Sam. 23. 8-12. It is just possible that Abishai was one of the three courageous men who broke through the Philistine garrison at Bethlehem to bring water to David, 2 Sam. 23. 13-18; 1 Chron. 11. 15-21. If so, this is not the only time when the great warrior broke through 'enemy' lines and came back with some water, 1 Sam. 26. 11!⁵

'Go down with me ... to the camp'. We can compare the encouragement which God gave Gideon in Judges 7, when about to face odds of 450:1 against; 'it came to pass the same night, that the Lord said unto him ... if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host (the same word as 'camp' here – being the camp of the Midianites). And thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host (camp)', Judg. 7. 9-10 – which their hands were.⁶ But David wasn't looking for encouragement; he was looking for some tangible proof of his loyalty to show to Saul – looking to collect evidence that he could have killed Saul if he had wanted. David wasn't wanting to 'hear' – he was wanting a *spear!*

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David's question inspired Abishai just as once a similar question from Jonathan had inspired his armour-bearer, 1 Sam. 14. 1. Abishai was certainly a good man for David to have with him. At a later stage in his life, David was extremely glad of Abishai's services. We read in 2 Samuel 21 of 'Ishbibenob, which was of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of brass in weight, he being girded with a new sword, thought to have slain David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah succoured him, and smote the Philistine, and killed him', vv. 16-17. Though *David* had no intention of harming Saul, David said nothing of what was in his mind, and it is obvious that Abishai read something very different – and more violent – into David's proposal.

Verse 7. *'So David and Abishai came to the people by night: and, behold, Saul lay sleeping within the trench, and his spear stuck in the ground at his bolster: but Abner and the people lay round about him'*. They picked and threaded their way through the sleeping ranks and managed to get by Saul's bodyguards.

'At his bolster'. Saul's spear, as the conspicuous symbol of his rule stood at his 'pillow' or 'the place of his head'. Although not mentioned yet, a cruse (jar) of water was also alongside, v. 12 – just as a cruse (jar) of water (the same Hebrew expression) stood alongside Elijah's head while he slept in 1 Kings 19. 6.

David could write at one stage in his life, 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety', Psa. 4.8. Saul 'lay sleeping' – but was hardly 'dwelling in safety'.

The two men stood whispering over Saul's sleeping form. In Abishai's eyes, the opportunity was too good to miss and he broke into perhaps his most theological declaration.

Verse 8. *'Then said Abishai to David, God hath delivered thine enemy into thine hand this day'*. David received the same advice as he had earlier in the cave. On both occasions, David's associates pointed out that the opportunity of killing Saul was no accident. God had clearly provided the opportunity. On a point of detail, I note that the word

translated 'delivered' differs from that used by David's men in 24. 4, 'Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, 'Behold, I will deliver (that is, 'give') thine enemy into thine hand'. The word here is literally to 'shut up', to 'enclose'; as, for example, in 23. 7; 23. 11-12; 24. 18. Interestingly, this is the word used by David in his battle speech to Goliath in chapter 17; 'This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand', v. 46. Perhaps this is intended by the Holy Spirit as a deliberate reminiscence. On that occasion, David had been right and David's own hand had slain the Philistine; on this occasion, Abishai was also right, but David had no intention of lifting up his hand – or permitting Abishai to lift up his hand – against Saul to slay him.

'Now therefore let me smite him, I pray thee, with the spear even to the earth at once, and I will not smite him the second time'. I gather from scripture that restraint wasn't Abishai's strong point. He had a tendency to want to dispose of any unpleasant opponents. Note, for example, his later proposal to kill cursing Shimei on the spot; 'Then said Abishai the son of Zeruiah unto the king, Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head', 2 Sam 16. 9. Nor was Abishai a man to give up easily; 'And Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was come over Jordan; And said unto the king, Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither do thou remember that which thy servant did perversely the day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should take it to his heart. For thy servant doth know that I have sinned: therefore, behold, I am come the first this day of all the house of Joseph to go down to meet my lord the king. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered and said, Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed?' – a rather clever use of the description which David himself had regularly given of Saul to mark him out as someone very special, 19. 21-23.

It is noticeable that David's men – even his nephew Abishai – were at all times subject to his orders and authority – and that they wouldn't normally act without his express approval – I say 'normally' because of the spontaneous act of loyalty and courage of David's three mighty men – of whom Abishai may have been one – when, leaving the cave of Adullam and, heedless of the danger facing them, they marched the twelve miles from Adullam east-northeast to Bethlehem, 'broke through' the Philistine lines, drew water from the well at Bethlehem, and carried it back for David to drink, 2 Sam. 23. 13-17; 1 Chron. 11. 15-19.⁷

'At once'. Meaning, not 'immediately', but 'with one stroke'. In view of what had transpired in the cave back in chapter 24, Abishai may well have thought that, though David scrupled to kill Saul with his own hand, yet he would be more than happy for one of his officers to slay him. 'David, it goes without saying that you didn't ask for volunteers to come down here only to look at the king and then go back again. If you prefer not to do it yourself, let me nail him with the spear into the ground just once; I won't need a second go. I assure you my one stroke will be so deadly, so instant in its effect, that there will be no groan or sigh to awake Abner or anyone else'.

And when Abishai said that he would not need to strike twice, he was right! I suspect that his eyes had lit up at the very sight of Saul's spear. A spear was Abishai's kind of weapon! We read that 'Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruiah, was chief among three. And he *lifted up his spear* against three hundred, and slew them, and had the name among three. Was he not most honourable of three? Therefore he was their captain', 2 Sam. 23. 18. Although that exploit may well have taken place some time later, Abishai was clearly very good with a spear! Saul may have been renowned for the use of his sword, Jonathan for the use of his bow, and David for the use of his sling – but just put a spear in Abishai's hand.

But I guess that, in Abishai's eyes, the irony would have been simply superb – that Saul, the rejected king, should be killed with his own spear, the very symbol of his authority and kingship. On top of which, that he should be killed with the very weapon with which, on more than one occasion, he had sought to slay God's anointed king, 18. 11; 19. 9-10.⁸ 'David', I imagine Abishai whispering, 'I know that previously Saul made three attempts to get you with that very spear – he failed. Believe me; I will not need two attempts!' And it did look as though God had arranged things to the end that Saul should be slain now and in this way. Admittedly, in one sense, the previous opportunity had been a certain case of God's over-ruling providence in that Saul had accidentally wandered into the very cave where David and his men lay hidden, whereas this time David had taken the initiative. But this time also God was clearly at work for here was something even more extraordinary – that Saul's entire camp was wrapped in what must have been, surely, a supernatural slumber.

No doubt, David's experience in chapter 25 had reinforced his conviction, expressed earlier in the cave at En-ge-di, that it must be God's action, and not any action of his own, which would deliver him from Saul and put an end to Saul's reign. And so he whispers back, in equally theological tones ...

Verse 9. *'And David said to Abishai, Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?'* David's command, 'Do not destroy', may have been one of David's common sayings. I note that it appears in the titles of three of his psalms (Psalms 57 to 59) – two of which were composed during David's fugitive days: Psalm 57 in the cave, either of Adullam or En-ge-di, and Psalm 59 in David's house when Saul sent messengers to kill him.

Although David had said something similar to his men back in chapter 24, he now had more just reason than before to kill Saul, for Saul had since gone back on his previous promise to leave David alone. I suspect that many of us, if we had been in David's position, might have said, 'I showed pity to him and spared him once before – and much good it did me! I may be a long-suffering, but I'm not stupid. Saul had his chance and blew it. God knows that – and this second opportunity is obviously from Him!'

Verse 10. *'David said furthermore, As the Lord liveth, the Lord shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall descend into battle, and perish'*. Having told Abishai that it would be *sinful* to lay violent hands upon one whose person was sacred, David added that it was also altogether *unnecessary*. For God would, sooner or later, Himself cut him off.

Here is *the same kind* of patience and restraint we witnessed back in chapter 24, but it is now *deeper*. For David has learned much from his near-fiasco with Nabal, through which the Lord confirmed to him unmistakably that He could be trusted to handle foolish oppressors when matters are left in His hands – a point emphasized by the Holy Spirit by the use of the same verb in both chapters, ‘the Lord smote Nabal, and he died ...the Lord shall smite him’, 25. 38; 26. 10.

David could imagine several ways in which the Lord might remove Saul. (a) The Lord might ‘strike’ him – perhaps with some fatal disease or illness, as he did his ‘double’ Nabal, 25. 38; or (b) ‘his day shall come to die’⁹ – that is, a natural death;¹⁰ or (c) he will ‘descend into battle and perish (literally, ‘be swept away’) – that is, he will die in the midst of the battle, which is, of course, what happened.

David understood God to be at work among men equally in all three ways. But in Saul’s case the Lord would be the cause of Saul’s death, not only because of His sovereign over-arching will, but because vengeance belonged to him, as Abigail had reminded David and as he himself had acknowledged in the case of Nabal.

Of course David didn’t know which means the Lord would use to achieve His will – nor did he need to know. He knew all he needed to – not how it was that providence would work but what it was that obedience required – namely that the Lord didn’t want him to dispose of the anointed king himself.

Verse 11. ‘*The Lord forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the Lord’s anointed*’. David’s reply to Abishai ended as it began in verse 9 – with the theological reason why David would not permit Abishai to kill Saul: that, whatever Saul had done, he remained ‘the Lord’s anointed’.

There may be a subtlety in David’s response here. In effect, Abishai had said to David, ‘All right, if you can’t find it in yourself to kill Saul; then let me do it’. But David replies in terms of his own actions; ‘The Lord forbid that I should stretch out *my* hand ...’ – as though he was saying to Abishai, ‘Even though it was your hand which actually killed Saul, it would be my responsibility for authorising you to do so’. It would be in this very way that David would later be responsible for the death of Uriah. It was David’s business as leader to restrain Abishai – just as it had been the responsibility of Eli to restrain his two sons from their evil practices, 2. 13. We cannot always avoid the responsibility for the actions of others – certainly not those over whom we have been given some authority – whether in the home or the assembly.

‘*Take thou now the spear that is at his bolster, and the cruse of water, and let us go*’. In 24.4 he had taken ‘a hem of Saul’s robe’. Here he orders Abishai to take Saul’s ceremonial spear, which was also the insignia of his office and a symbol of his kingship – together with his water jug.

I see no evidence that there was anything special about the jug – David does not even offer to return it in verse 22. In all likelihood, the jug or cruse was one of the small disk-shaped vessels which archaeologists have found from this period, and which featured two handles around the mouth so that they could be attached to a strap. David may have instructed Abishai to bring it for no higher reason than that David was himself thirsty but did not want to hang around longer in Saul’s camp than he needed to. On the other hand, David may have decided deliberately to deprive Saul both of his weapon and his water because for a man to be without these in that region constituted a threat to his very life. David would thereby be giving Saul a clear demonstration of how Saul’s life was altogether in David’s hands.

Verse 12. ‘*So David took the spear and the cruse of water from Saul’s bolster; and they gat them away*’. ‘They came, they saw, they plundered’. I suspect that Abishai may have felt really disappointed as he withdrew with his trophies. I can see him shaking his head as he and David made their way back through the maze of bodies surrounding Saul, murmuring to himself, ‘And then he wouldn’t let me do it. Risked my life tonight on a suicide mission for a spear and a jug of water!’ But then at this point Abishai didn’t know what David had in his mind.

‘*And no man saw it, nor knew it, neither awaked*’. The text is very graphic and lively: ‘no-one saw, no-one knew, no-one awoke’.

‘*For they were all asleep; because a deep sleep from the Lord was fallen upon them*’. The Holy Spirit here points out that Saul was helpless because of God’s hand on him. On a previous occasion, God’s Spirit had rendered him helpless in the presence of David, 19. 22-24; now his deep sleep does the same.¹¹ Not that David and Abishai knew this when they set out on their mission – so it in no way detracts from their courage in going!

‘*A deep sleep ... was fallen upon them*’. I’ve been to meetings just like this! I guess that most preachers and Bible teachers get used to talking in other people’s sleep! I have even wondered at times whether one or two companies of God’s people I have visited had adopted Eutyches for their patron saint!

More seriously, we would do well comparing this incident with two incidents recorded in the book of Genesis, both of which employ exactly the same Hebrew expression. First, we read in Genesis 2 that ‘the Lord God caused a *deep sleep* to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib ... made he a woman, and brought her unto the man’, Gen. 2. 21-22.

Second, we read in the latter part of Genesis 15 (vv. 7-21) – following the statement of Abram’s justification by his faith – of the covenant which the Lord made with Abram concerning the Promised Land, and of the ‘smoking furnace (oven) and a burning lamp (flaming torch)’¹² passing between the animal sacrificial victims which, on the Lord’s instructions, Abraham had divided.¹³ It seems that in the Ancient Near East, normally two parties would divide an animal into two equal parts, join hands, and pass between the two parts.¹⁴ But on this occasion, in token and symbol, God alone passed between the parts – indicating that Abram had no obligations to fulfill that he might receive the covenant promises.¹⁵ It was in this context that, ‘when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him’.

All three references point us to great and profound truths. The deep sleep of Adam in Genesis 2 points us to the *mystery* of Christ and the church, ‘we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a

man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church', Eph. 5. 30-32. The deep sleep of Abram in Genesis 15 points us to the *marvel* of God's unconditional promise and covenant. And the deep sleep of Saul in 1 Samuel 26 points us to the *movements* of God's over-ruling providence.

Verses 13-16 'Wakey, wakey, Abner!'

Verse 13. *'Then David went over to the other side, and stood on the top of an hill afar off; a great space being between them'*. David stationed himself within hailing range, yet at sufficient distance that Saul's men could not come at him quickly or easily. The precaution he took suggests that he trusted Saul even less now than previously. On a later occasion Shimei (of the house of Saul), 2 Sam. 16. 5) would similarly leave a valley between himself and David in order to curse him and throw stones at him; 'as David and his men went by the way, Shimei went along on the hill's side over against him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and cast dust', 2 Sam 16.13 – a very wise precaution with men like Abishai around! On both occasions, it was a case of 'better safe than sorry'.

Verse 14. *'David cried to the people, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, Answerest thou not, Abner?'* David's wording implies that he had to call several times. Clearly Saul and his men were sleeping very soundly!

Verse 15. *'David said to Abner, Art not thou a valiant man? and who is like to thee in Israel? wherefore then hast thou not kept thy lord the king?'* David boldly charged Abner as commander-in-chief of Saul's forces with criminal neglect because, as the one chiefly responsible for the protection of the Lord's anointed, he was responsible for the serious breach of security which had endangered the life of the king.

'Are not you a man', literally (so too the Septuagint) – that is, 'Are you not worthy of the name?' We do well to heed Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, 'Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong', 1 Cor. 16.13 – as the apostle urged his unstable readers to 'watch' – to have regard for danger from inside as well as outside the church – and to act like mature men – "to play the man" (a verb illustrated in the papyri), W. E. Vine – rather than as immature children and babes, as he had described them in chapter 3 (v. 1).

'For there came one of the people in to destroy the king thy lord'. The 'one of the people' was of course Abishai, whom David – and David alone – had kept back from destroying the king.

Verse 16. *'This thing is not good that thou hast done. As the Lord liveth, ye are worthy to die, because ye have not kept your master, the Lord's anointed'*. Note the plural 'ye' following the 'thou'. It was not only Abner who had proven a shoddy bodyguard – they all had – and as such they were all 'sons of death'. What an irony; 'As the Lord lives ... you all deserve to die'. All of Saul's men should be court-martialed and executed for failing to protect the life of the king. And the evidence against them was conclusive – look where the king's spear and water jug are now!

'Now see where the king's spear is, and the cruse of water that was at his bolster'. David makes his point with a spear! Imagine the dismay, especially for Abner, when they look at the ground, inches from Saul's head, and see the hole where the spear has been. David implied that he cared more for Saul's life than Abner and Saul's bodyguard did – and that it was, David was saying in effect, Abner and Saul's bodyguard who really deserved to face the death-sentence from Saul – not him!

Verses 17-20 David makes his final appeal to Saul

Verse 17. *And Saul knew David's voice, and said, Is this thy voice, my son David?'* Saul asks the same first question he had in chapter 24 (v. 16). Indeed, it is possible that the sound of David's voice across the hillside reawakened Saul's memory of his earlier encounter with him then. But on this occasion David's voice was probably the only way Saul would recognise him – because of the darkness as well as the distance. Saul's immediate reference to David as his 'son' was no doubt music to David's ears, reassuring him that his tactic had proved successful. Yet I note – as possibly David noted – that Saul didn't shed tears as he had back in chapter 24, when Saul had said, 'Is this thy voice, my son David? And Saul lifted up his voice, and wept', v 16. It is possible that Saul had become a little more hardened now.

'And David said, It is my voice, my lord, O king'. Unlike in chapter 24, this time David didn't now address Saul as his 'father'.

Verses 18- 19. *'Wherefore doth my lord thus pursue after his servant? for what have I done? or what evil is in mine hand? Now therefore, I pray thee, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If the Lord have stirred thee up against me, let him accept an offering (literally, 'smell an offering' – expressing divine satisfaction and pleasure): but if they be the children of men, cursed be they before the Lord'*.

'What have I done?' was the very question he had earlier asked of Jonathan back at the beginning of chapter 20 (v. 1). It was in both cases the testimony of a clear conscience. David quite reasonably assumed that Saul believed him to be guilty of some wrongdoing and that he therefore needed to be hunted down and eliminated.

David traced such a view to one of two possible sources. The second possibility – that of men having incited Saul against him is straightforward. But it is not so easy to understand the meaning of the first possibility – that the Lord Himself had 'incited' the king to seek his life and that an appropriate offering should therefore be made to the Lord.

I think it is true to say that the most commonly held view of the passage runs as follows – that David acknowledged that it was conceivable, at least in theory, that he had done something wrong, and that the Lord had therefore stirred up Saul – acting as the instrument and executor of God's judgement – to deal with this sin. If this was the case, Saul had only to tell David what his sin had been, and David could then appease God's anger and secure His favour by

offering an acceptable sacrifice. That done, there would no longer be any need for Saul to continue to pursue and punish David, because God would have pardoned him.

But, this interpretation continues, that David was pointing out to Saul that there was another possibility. If David was innocent, then there were those who were *wrongly* accusing David before Saul as a dangerous criminal and as worthy of death – egging Saul on to take action against him. If this is the case, then David wished a curse before the Lord on such false accusers. That it wasn't David who was worthy of death, but those who have wrongly accused him before Saul. But, for my part, I am not convinced that this what David meant.

I note first that David didn't specify who it was should make the offering. As I see it, he may *not* have been suggesting that *he* do so at all. Indeed, I suggest that David's repeated protestations of his innocence both before and after this – namely in verses 18, 23–24 – reinforced by Saul's confession of sin in verse 21, argues strongly against this interpretation – even if David's words are understood as merely setting out a theoretical possibility which Saul was expected to dismiss.

I suggest that we should interpret David's reference to the possibility of God's having incited Saul's hounding of him in the light of the wider context. It has been made clear back in chapters 13 and 15 that the Lord had declared that He would cut off both Saul himself and his dynasty because of Saul's blatant rebellion, 15. 26–29; cf. 13. 13–14. Shortly after that declaration, the Lord withdrew His Spirit from Saul, sending an 'evil' (harmful and distressing) spirit to replace the Spirit of the Lord and to fill Saul with alarm – which it did on many occasions, 16. 14–16, 23; 18. 10; 19. 9. David had been introduced into the royal court to bring relief to the king when Saul was affected by this spirit, 16. 23. This 'spirit of distress' was therefore an instrument of divine judgment on Saul – making it apparent to all – including David – that Saul was unfit to rule and was the object of God's disfavour. I think that David therefore suggested to Saul that, as he, Saul, was the object of divine judgment, the proper course of action for him was to appease the Lord with an offering – which is what David now advised him to do.¹⁶ And I note that the Septuagint translators understood it this way, rendering the central part of verse 19, 'If God stirs thee up against me, let *thine* offering be acceptable' (italics mine).

It was possibly a kind gesture on David's part that he makes no reference to a third – and yet obvious – possibility; namely that Saul was motivated simply by personal envy and animosity. I say 'possibly' because David may never have actually considered this as a possibility.

'For they have driven me out this day from abiding in the inheritance of the Lord, saying, Go, serve other gods'. To some extent, David's words prepare us for what we meet in the next chapter, when David reluctantly leaves the land of Israel and takes refuge with the Philistines. David's enemies in Israel may well have later argued that David was a traitor to his own faith, who, during his time among the Philistines, had actually worshipped and sought protection from their gods. But David didn't mean that he would in reality worship foreign gods. He simply drew Saul's attention to the fact that on any foreign territory there would be no sanctuary or shrine to the Lord where he could worship the true and living God, and that any who incited Saul against David were pressuring him to flee from his own country, and might as well therefore have said to him, 'Go, serve other gods'.

It was not that David held the view – as did some – that his God could be worshipped in a proper and acceptable manner only in His own land – nor even, with my eye on the words and actions of Namaan in 2 Kings 5, in some foreign land only if any sacrifices were offered on an altar built of the earth of God's own land, or if the worshipper knelt on earth from God's own land.

The curse which David pronounced on such men was entirely justified – being consistent with several sections in Deuteronomy 13; 'If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams ... spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them ... that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death', vv. 1-5; and 'If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend ... entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known ... thou shalt surely kill him ... thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away ('drive you away'; compare David's words) from the Lord thy God', vv. 6-10.¹⁷ To say, by word or action, 'Go, serve other gods' was then an extremely serious matter, and Saul needed to understand the implications of his relentless pursuit of David – that it was, in effect, prompting him to break 'the first and greatest commandment'.

It is clear that what pained David most about his persecution by Saul was not being deprived of his position in the royal court, nor even the loss of his wife Michal – although both may well have hurt him deeply – but being driven away from God's land and thereby from the public worship of the Lord, being driven into some foreign land where he would be constantly surrounded by temptation to idolatry. David was very much alive to the spiritual consequences of mixing too closely with the pagan nations around. Both the Law of Moses and the earlier spiritual history of Israel sounded warnings loud and clear about just this.

What hurt David most then was that he would no longer be able to attend the house of God – at that time, the tabernacle.¹⁸ When considering chapter 21 last year, we noted that David's first action when Jonathan confirmed Saul's malicious intentions towards him was to make straight for the Lord's tabernacle – then situated at Nob. Apart from acquiring sustenance for his men and a weapon for himself, I suggested then that it was highly likely that David wanted to *meet with God* there once more before he left the Lord's land for foreign soil.

In any case, we pick up something of David's firm attachment to God's house and dwelling from many unmistakable references to this in several of his psalms. We have from his pen, for example, 'I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour ('thy glory') dwelleth', Psalms 26.8; 'One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple', Psalms 27.4; 'we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house', Psalms 65. 4. 'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord', Psalms 122.1. It is against the background of such

references that we can understand David's sense of horror at being driven away from the Lord's 'inheritance', where alone His house was to be found.

We know well Paul's words to Timothy, 'if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth', 1 Tim. 3. 15. But I have to ask myself, how great is my affection for – and commitment to – the house of God today?

Verse 20. *Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth before the face of the Lord: for the king of Israel is come out to seek a flea, as when one doth hunt a partridge in the mountains*'. As in chapter 24 (v. 14), David compared himself to a mere flea, essentially harmless even if annoying to Saul – stressing again how incongruous was Saul's enterprise. 'The king of Israel', no less, has taken it upon himself to 'come out'¹⁹ to track down something so altogether trivial and unworthy of his notice, his time or his energy, as 'a single flea' (literally).

He reinforced the point by likening himself also to 'a partridge' hunted on the mountains.²⁰ The only partridge found in the desert areas west of the Dead Sea is the sand partridge (*Ammoperdix heyi*). This partridge endeavours to save itself not by flight but by running, and it is in fact a fast runner over short distances, speeding along the ground when it is chased, darting from one bush to another, until it finally becomes exhausted and can be knocked down easily by the hunter's sticks thrown along the ground. This was a very apt description of the manner in which Saul had been pursuing David. David's point is probably that nobody would think it worth his while to hunt a single partridge which had flown to 'the mountains', when partridges could be found in sizeable groups in fields.

It is also at least possible that David intended the reference to a partridge as something of a pun, making a word play on Abner's question in verse 14, 'Who art thou that criest ('that calls') to the king?' For the Hebrew word for partridge, translated literally, is 'one who calls' – 'a caller-bird', that is. 'You want to know who is calling?', David may be saying, 'Its only me, one single caller-bird'.

David's point then in comparing himself to both a single flea and a sand partridge was that such an insignificant person as himself was altogether beneath the interest of the king of Israel – and certainly not a fit subject for a full-scale hunting expedition.

Verses 21-25 Saul's confession and parting from David

Verse 21. *'Then said Saul, I have sinned'*.

On two previous occasions, we have heard Saul say, 'I have sinned' – both in chapter 15. First, 'Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord', 15. 24, and then, 'he said, I have sinned: yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel', v. 30. Yet Saul never changed his ways or brought forth fruits meet for repentance.

By way of contrast, when David confessed his sinfulness to Nathan – and more importantly – to God, following his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, he was not only sincere, but turned his back on his sin and never repeated it – 'David said unto Nathan, *I have sinned* against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die', 2 Sam. 12. 13; 'Against thee, thee only, *have I sinned*, and done *this* evil in thy sight', Psa. 51. 4. The same was true of his sin in ordering the census in Israel, 'David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly in that I have done', 2 Sam. 24. 10.

God's word is clear for every age, 'Let the wicked *forsake* his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts ...', Isa. 55. 7. To forsake sin is to leave it without any thought of returning to it again. The question for me is simple – am I really sincere when, in accordance with 1 John 1. 9, I confess my sins? Do I really see them as committed against God? Do I turn away from them? If my repentance is real, I suggest I would desire above all else to turn the clock back if I could, and overcome the temptation to which I succumbed.

'Return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm'. This was in effect an invitation back into the royal court, although Saul had already given David's wife Michal to another man, 25. 44. For all Saul's protection – for all his 3,000 troops – Saul had been shown to have been defenseless, and David, in effortlessly pilfering the very symbol of Saul's power, 'disarmed' Saul in more senses than one.

'Because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day'. That is, it was highly valued and esteemed.

'Behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly'. I guess that 'I have played the fool' would have made a good title for Saul's autobiography if he had ever cared to write one.

He admitted, not only that he has sinned and erred 'very greatly', but that – in common with his 'double' Nabal – he had 'acted the fool'.²¹ For all, whether sheep-farmer or monarch of the land, who oppose God's plans are eventually shown to be fools.

Once, following Saul's impatient and presumptuous offering of a burnt-offering in chapter 13, Samuel had rebuked Saul for his folly; 'Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly (the same Hebrew word): thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee', 13. 13. But now it is Saul himself who recognizes the fact.

Verse 22. *David answered and said, Behold the king's spear! and let one of the young men come over and fetch it'*. David saw no reason, because Saul has been a fool, for him to be one.

David offered to return Saul's spear – possibly restoring to Saul the symbol of Saul's authority to rule as king. But he makes no such offer in respect of the water jug. Perhaps retaining of the jug was David's way of demonstrating that he retained control over the situation.

Verse 23. *'The Lord render to every man his righteousness and his faithfulness'*. David wasn't sounding his own praise – wasn't blowing his own trumpet; he is simply expressing his confidence that, in His time, the Lord would recompense him for his upright behaviour. David trusts in the justice of a God who blesses the righteous and the faithful. When he later became king, he recognized that his righteousness had indeed been repaid; 'The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God ... I was also upright before him, and I kept myself from mine iniquity. Therefore hath the Lord recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight', *Psa. 18. 20-24*. We too serve a God who is not unrighteous to forget, *Heb. 6. 10!*

'The Lord delivered thee into my hand to day, but I would not stretch forth mine hand against the Lord's anointed'. David reminded Saul that this was how he still regarded him.

Verse 24. *'As thy life was much set by this day in mine eyes, so let my life be much set by in the eyes of the Lord'*. The word translated 'set by' signifies 'great' or 'magnified' – which is in fact how the Septuagint renders the word. That is, David was saying, 'Just as your life was thought to be something great in my sight', *not* 'so may my life be thought to be something great in yours' – for previous experience has taught him that it just wouldn't happen – but 'so may my life be thought to be something great in the Lord's sight'.

'Let him deliver me out of all tribulation'. David certainly couldn't count on Saul to deliver him out of 'all trouble' (all adversity, all distress). After all, Saul was *himself* the main cause of all David's trouble and distress. It was David's later testimony that the Lord had done just what he now asked; 'David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother (the murderers of Saul's son, Ishbosheth) ... and said unto them, As the Lord liveth, who hath redeemed my soul out of all adversity (the same word translated 'tribulation' in *1 Sam. 26. 24*), *2 Sam. 4. 9*; and, on his very deathbed, 'the king sware (to Bathsheba), and said, As the Lord liveth, that hath redeemed my soul out of all distress (again the same word translated 'tribulation' in *1 Sam. 26. 24*)', *1 Kings 1. 29*.

Commenting on David's words in Psalm 31, 'My times are in Thy hand: deliver me from the hand of my enemies', v. 15, one of the Puritans wrote, 'If our times were in our own hand, we would have deliverance too soon; if they were in our enemy's hand, we should have deliverance too late; but my times are in Thy hand; and God's time is ever best'.²² How very true!

Verse 25. *'Then Saul said to David, Blessed be thou, my son David: thou shalt both do great things, and also shalt still prevail'*.

For a third time in the section, Saul addressed David as his 'son'. 'Shalt both do ... and ... prevail' is literally 'doing thou shalt do and shall be able'. And so, ironically, Saul's final words spoken to David were the pronouncement of his blessing on David and the recognition of David's future greatness and ultimate triumph.

'So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place'. Although Saul had, no doubt sincerely, offered David the opportunity to 'return', v. 21, David's past experience of what had come of Saul's best intentions had taught him that this not a sensible option, and so he 'went on his way' – seemingly, this time making the first move, unlike at the end of chapter 24, where Saul apparently left first; 'Saul went home; but David and his men gat them up unto the hold', *24. 22*.

The closing sentence of the chapter marks a major dividing line in the story. There is nothing more to be said by either David or Saul – and the two men parted, never to see the other again.

Saul's 'place' was no doubt his home-base of Gibeah – as in verse 1, where 'the Ziphites came unto Saul to Gibeah'. The opening of the next chapter will tell us where David's 'way' took him – probably the last place we would ever have imagined – the more so given his expressed aversion to leaving 'the inheritance of the Lord' and of being exposed to the idolatrous practices of the nations around – not to speak of his earlier unsuccessful, unhappy and acutely humiliating experience in the land of the Philistines, *21. 10-15*.

Pick up the lessons :

David had been here before. With the passage of time, his attempt to win Saul over in chapter 24 had come to nothing. Yet David persisted in his longsuffering – not willing to give in easily. Note Paul's words to the Colossians about being 'strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all *patience* (endurance, steadfastness, the ability to see things through) and *longsuffering* (the opposite of wrath, retaliation and a spirit of revenge) with joyfulness', Col. 1.11. That is, I will need God's power (proportioned not so much to my need, but to God's own abundant supply) to work in me, if I am to show joyful – even, cheerful – (a) endurance in the face of adverse circumstances and (b) long-suffering towards people.

Verses 3-6. If there is a rift and estrangement between me and another, I ought to take the initiative and do all in my power to heal it and get it sorted out. Compare Matt. 5. 23-25 (action to be initiated by the guilty party), and Matt. 18. 15-17 (action to be initiated by the injured party).

Verse 10. David did not know which means the Lord would use to achieve His will – nor did he need to know that. He knew all he needed to – not how it was that *providence* would work, but what it was that *obedience* required. He knew that the Lord didn't want him to dispose of the anointed king himself. Our business as God's people is not to fret because we do not understand all of God's ways but to submit to His word and commands. Deuteronomy 29. 29 is a text well worth learning – 'The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law!'

Verses 18-19. We noted that what hurt David most was that he would no longer be able to attend the house of God – then the tabernacle – and we picked up something of David's firm attachment to God's house and dwelling from many unmistakable references to this his psalms. We quoted 1 Timothy 3. 15 and posed the very personal question, 'How great is my affection for – and commitment to – the house of God today?'

Verse 21. Some 16-18 months before his death²³, Saul had to confess, 'I have sinned ... I have played the fool, I have erred (gone astray) exceedingly'. Note that three-fold 'I have'. In stark contrast, another 'Saul' – now 'Paul' - also probably within months of his death – could claim, 'I have *fought the good fight*, I have *finished my course* (race), I have *kept the faith*', 2 Tim. 4.7. How am I going to finish my course? Like the Saul of the Old Testament or the Saul of the New Testament?

Am I sincere when, in accordance with 1 John 1. 9, I confess *my sins*? Is my repentance real?

Verses 22-23. David refused to recompense evil to Saul but looked to God to vindicate and deliver him. There are two of Solomon's proverbs which could well have come out of his father's experience; 'Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee', Prov. 20. 22, and 'Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me', Prov. 24. 29. The latter of which links, of course, with the saying of the Lord Jesus, 'All things whatsoever (in quantity) ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so (in quality) to them: for this is the law and the prophets', Matt. 7.12. I guess that, by setting His 'Golden Rule' in the context of the fulfillment of the scriptures, the Lord provided His disciples with a handy summary of the righteousness to be lived out in God's kingdom.

It is, of course, the Son of David Himself who has left us the greatest example of One who trusted the Father to vindicate Him. We have only to think of Peter's well-known words, 'Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed *himself* to him that judgeth righteously', 1 Pet. 2. 21-23. And we recall that our Lord's very last words before He released His spirit were based upon those of David in Psalm 31; 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit', Luke 23. 46; Psa. 31. 5. Our vindication does not always come, as did David's, in the present life. Sometimes it will come, as Jesus' vindication did, after death. But at some time or another, God will balance the scales of justice. We do not need to avenge ourselves – 'leave it to the wrath of God', Rom. 12. 19 ESV.

End-notes

¹ See 1 Sam. 13. 2; 24. 2.

² See 1 Sam. 19. 8, 10, 12, 18; 20. 1; 21. 10; 22. 1; 23. 13.

³ Only found in 1 Sam. 24.20; 26. 5, 7.

⁴ Compare many of Paul's close companions, of whom we know no more than their names; for example in Acts 20 and Rom. 16. But we rest in the knowledge that God knows all.

⁵ See, for instance, '*The Message of Samuel*', Mary Evans in the *Bible Speaks Today* series, page 276, the Cambridge Bible, A. F. Kilpatrick, page 218, and The Pulpit Commentary, R. Payne Smith, page 498. The Hebrew text in both 2 Sam. 23. 18 and 1 Chron. 11.20 says of Abishai that he was 'chief (head) of the three' – which follows in both cases the account of the Bethlehem water.

⁶ For the odds of 450:1, see Judg. 7. 8; 8.10. Interestingly, Elijah faced 450 prophets of Ba'al alone on Mount Carmel, 1 Kings 18. 22 – apart from the 400 prophets of Asherah, v. 19.

⁷ Just as the gracious gesture of the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' head would be proclaimed everywhere "in memory of her" (Matt 26.13), so also the exploits (v.17) of the courageous warriors—whose self-denying loyalty prompted David to pour out an oblation to the Lord—would be remembered for all future generations.

⁸ This was also the very weapon with which Saul had once attempted to kill his own son, Jonathan, because of his loyalty to David.

⁹ Compare Jer. 50. 27, 31; Ezek 21.25, 29.

¹⁰ Compare David's words in Psalm 37; 'The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming', vv. 12-13.

¹¹ God controls sleeping. Sometimes making men sleep; sometimes not letting them! Note, 'On that night could not the king (Ahasuerus) sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles', Esther 6. 1. Also Acts 5.19, 23; 12. 4, 6, 9-10.

¹² 'The smoking oven and flaming torch were one', Thomas Constable.

¹³ Though not the birds, Gen. 15. 10.

¹⁴ Compare Jer. 34.18-19.

¹⁵ Genesis 15. 18 was the formal 'cutting' of the Abrahamic Covenant. God now formalized His earlier promises into a suzerainty treaty, similar to a royal land grant, since Abram now understood and believed what God had promised. God as king bound Himself to do something for His servant Abram. The fulfillment of the covenant did not depend on Abram's obedience. It rested entirely on God's faithfulness. See Constable.

¹⁶ See further R. B. Chisholm Jnr. 'Does God Deceive?', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998), pages 11-28.

¹⁷ Note also Deut. 13. 12-16.

¹⁸ The Lord was seen in His sanctuary, Psa. 63. 2. It was there that He manifested His gracious presence to His people. See further, Willem A. VanGemeren, 'Psalms', *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Appendix to Psa. 132, Vol. 5, pages 809-819.

¹⁹ The word of 23. 15, 'David saw that Saul was come out to seek his life'.

²⁰ The Septuagint paints an altogether different picture; 'as the nighthawk pursues its prey in the mountains'.

²¹ The two Hebrew words in 1 Samuel 25. 25 and 26. 21 are different, but the idea is the same.

²² Thomas Watson.

²³ 1 Sam. 27. 7.