

7 February 2021

In the Wilderness

1 Samuel 21 – 2 Samuel 1 (2 Sam. 1:17-27)

When David parted from Jonathan, he wasted no time. Knowing that King Saul meant to kill him, he didn't go back to say goodbye to his wife or pick up any supplies. He just ran. Soon he came to the village of Nob, where he remembered that the Tabernacle of the Lord was at that season. He went to the chief priest, Ahimelech. "David?" asked Ahimelech. By this time most people knew David, Saul's most successful captain. "What are you doing without any men?"

"Special mission."

"Saul sent you?"

"Sort of, yeah. Very hush-hush. So important that I had to leave without provisions. You have any bread?"

"Well, there's the sacrificial bread. We're not really supposed to give it –"

"That'll be fine. I'll take it. And, um, you don't have any weapons here, do you?"

"There's the sword of Goliath, whom you killed. We keep it as a sign of God's power over the –"

"Excellent. I'll take that, too. Now remember. Hush-hush."

And David slipped away. Now he was headed for the dry, sunbaked desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, which was honeycombed with caves. Outlaws and misfits have hidden there for thousands of years. But Saul would know he was going there, so to hide his trail, David started the opposite direction – right into Philistine territory. Unfortunately, most of the Philistines also knew David by sight. Just outside of Gath, he was identified and captured. The Philistine guard dragged him before the king of Gath. "Isn't this David? The one they sing about, who has killed tens of thousands of Philistines?"

The king looked suspiciously at David, who was thinking furiously. Letting his eyes go blank, David opened his mouth and allowed a long string of drool run down his chin and dangle from his beard. "Is your name Beulah?" David said. "I used to have a baby goat named Beulah. One day I want to have a whole big farm of baby goats, and they'll all be named Beulah. You have a beard just like Beulah's. Can I braid it and tie an itty bitty ribbon in it? Aroooo!"

The king looked at his guards. "What were you thinking? That I need another looney in my court? Well, I don't. I have you, so I have all the idiots I can use. Get rid of him, will you?"

So they let David go ("Bye bye, Beulah!") and he made his way to the desert to hide alone among the caves. But he wasn't alone for long. As I said, this desert had been a hideout for misfits and outlaws for years. One by one, those exiles found David, and in David they found a leader. Soon they were joined by deserters from Saul's army, and other mighty men – especially from the tribe of Judah. These last included some of David's extended family. One was David's nephew Joab – the son David's big sister – and another was Joab's brother Abishai. Remember those names. Especially Joab.

But even as David was gathering outlaws and malcontents from the dregs of society, Saul was making his own plans. He sent spies out seeking David, and eventually one of them brought a witness. It was Doeg the Edomite, one of Saul's shepherds. "I saw David at Nob, talking to the priest Ahimelech," Doeg said. "The priest gave David food and a sword."

Furious, Saul and his army swept down on the Tabernacle. "What's this I hear, Ahimelech? Giving aid to my enemies?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Ahimelech.

"I have a witness! He saw you giving food to David!"

"Of course I gave food to David. He's your captain."

"Lies! I see that you've joined the enemy!"

"My lord, David's no enemy of yours."

"Quiet! I don't listen to traitors!" Saul gazed wildly around at his troops, then said, "Kill the priest! Kill him and all his family!" Saul's soldiers didn't move. "Kill them, I said!"

"No, my lord. We will not."

Livid, Saul turned to Doeg the Edomite. As a foreigner, he didn't care about the Lord's shrine. "You do it, then! I'll reward you." So Doeg the Edomite took a sword and slaughtered the priests of God. Only one escaped, a son of Ahimelech named Abiathar. David found him in the desert a few days later, staggering with grief and exhaustion, but still able to tell his story. David knelt by Abiathar and wept. "I am sorry, Abiathar. I have caused the death of your whole family true servants of God. I should never have involved your father. Can you forgive me?"

"You didn't kill them, my lord David."

"Nevertheless, I take the blame. If you will stay with me now, I will give you my protection now and forever."

So now David's band had a priest. Now I don't know how the rest of David's followers felt about that. These were not what you might call regular tabernacle-goers, but it mattered to David. Living in hiding, hand-to-mouth, leading a band of scruffy misfits, on the run, David could have decided that God had abandoned him, but he did not. Again and again, in the years that followed, we see David turning to Abiathar and asking, "What shall I do? Inquire for me of the Lord." And the Lord always answered. The superscriptions of the psalms tell us over and over that this or that psalm was composed by David during his exile in the desert. Psalm 63, *A psalm of David, in the wilderness*; Psalm 34, *A psalm of David, when he pretended madness before the king of Gath, who drove him away*; Psalm 52, *A psalm of David, when Doeg the Edomite went to the house of Saul and said to him 'David has gone to Ahimelech.'* This is important; maybe the most important thing we can learn from David. Whatever his danger, whatever his grief, he never gave up on God, never stopped praying. No matter how close he kept his sword, his harp was always nearby as well. Even in the wilderness.

Now it was hard there, keeping a small army alive in the desert. They learned the waterholes, learned to hunt, and whatever else they needed, they would supply by raiding – the Philistines. David wouldn't let his men raid in Israel. In fact, one time he got word that a host of

Philistines was attacking the Judean town of Keilah, and that King Saul was doing nothing to help (because he was putting together an army to chase David, actually). David went to Abiathar. “What should we do? Inquire of the Lord.” Abiathar inquired, then told David, “The Lord says go help the people of Keilah.” So David attacked the Philistines, delivered the city, and as a sort of bonus made off with a herd of Philistine livestock. Saul, meanwhile, hearing that David was at Keilah, marched his troops there, but David was gone.

And so it went for years. Saul was obsessed with David, ignoring his duties as king in his mad quest to secure his throne from an imagined enemy. Word came that old Samuel had died, and Israel mourned, but Saul simply continued chasing David all over the desert, managing somehow to stay just one jump behind him the whole time. The people of the land began to send supplies to David, the outlaw who wouldn’t steal from an Israelite, and sending him reports when Saul was close. And he was often *very* close. One night, Saul’s men made camp just a stone’s throw from where David’s men were hiding. When Saul’s army was asleep, David said, “Who wants to go with me?” His nephew Abishai grinned recklessly. “If you’re doing what I think, I’ll go.” Together they crept into Saul’s camp until they came to where the king himself lay asleep beside his general, Abner. Beside Saul was his spear and a jug of water.

“Now!” whispered Abishai. “Let me kill him. Just one blow. That’s all it’ll take.”

“Don’t ever let me hear you suggest that again,” David said. “This is the King of Israel, anointed by God. I will not stretch out a hand against him.”

“I’m not asking you to, David. Just look the other way for a second and –”

“Abishai, I mean it.”

Instead they took Saul’s spear and water jug. Crossing over a ravine to a nearby hill, David called out, “Abner! Abner, you should be hanged for incompetence. Is this what you call protecting your king?”

“What? Who’s that?” Saul’s camp began scrambling to their feet.

“My king!” called David. “Do you recognize these?” He held out the spear and jug. “It’s a good thing that I don’t want to kill you, isn’t it?”

Saul swallowed. “Is that your voice, my son David?”

“It is my voice, my lord, my king. And I will never seek your harm.”

For a moment, Saul remembered the boy who had sung him back to sanity and the young man who had served him so well. For that moment, the gray mist cleared. “I have done wrong, David, my son. Go in peace.”

David stayed in the desert, though. He knew how erratic Saul could be. But soon Saul had no time for David. The lords of the Philistine cities were forming an alliance, combining their forces to wipe out Israel once and for all. Saul mustered his troops, but they were pitifully few. He summoned the priests and asked them to inquire of God, something he hadn’t done in years, but Saul could get no response from the Lord. The night before the armies were to meet, on a mountain called Gilboa, Saul sat in his tent, and he had never felt more alone. He couldn’t even call on Samuel any more.

What I'm about to tell is one of the strangest incidents in the Bible. I have no explanation; all I can do is tell the story. One of Saul's servants came to him and said, "I know someone who could help you. Near here, in the down of En-Dor, is a witch who can call up the spirits of the dead."

And so Saul disguised himself and went to this witch. "And who would you like me summon?" she asked.

"Samuel. Call Samuel."

So the old woman prepared her spells and called for the spirit of God's prophet, judge, and priest. For a moment, nothing, then there he was, wrapped in a regal robe, his face tired. "Why have you summoned me?"

"My lord Samuel, it's Saul. I'm afraid. I face the Philistines tomorrow, but the Lord won't answer my cries!"

The shade spoke slowly and sadly. "And is it only now that you think to call on the Lord? Why do you think God is far from you today? Who do you think turned away? It's too late for you, Saul. You no longer have any choices. By this time tomorrow, you will be with me, you and your sons."

Then Samuel was gone.

The witch looked at the broken king and said, "You need to eat. Let me make you something." And so she did. Saul ate, then lifted his head. "You're wrong, Samuel," he said. "I do have one more choice." Saul left the witch and went back to his troops. In his eyes was a trace of the light that had once inspired an army to rescue the city of Jabesh-Gilead. "Tomorrow we fight for Israel, the people of the Lord." And the next morning, Saul led the Israelite charge.

A few days later, a man from Saul's army found his way to David in the desert. "My lord, I bring you news from the battle!"

"What is it? How does Israel stand?"

"Israel is scattered like sheep. And, my lord, Saul is dead. You are no longer an outlaw. King Saul will seek your death no longer. Look! I've brought you his crown!"

"How did you get that?"

"I found the king on Gilboa. He was wounded but still alive, then, but I fixed that."

"You fixed that?"

"I have always thought you should be king, not Saul. So I made sure of it."

"What about Jonathan?"

"Don't worry about him. He won't challenge your throne. He lay dead beside his father. I thought you'd want to know."

"You appear to feel that you should be compensated."

The man smiled. He didn't see the dangerous light in David's eyes. "That would be up to you, my king."

"Joab? This man says he killed my king. Compensate him." And David wept.

Scripture records David's own words after the Battle of Mt. Gilboa, an elegy for Saul and Jonathan. we read 2 Samuel chapter 1, verse 17, then 19-27:

¹⁷ David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan.

¹⁹ Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰ Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,
the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

²¹ You mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew or rain upon you,
nor bounteous fields!

For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

²² From the blood of the slain,
from the fat of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
nor the sword of Saul return empty.

²³ Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.

²⁴ O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

²⁵ How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

²⁶ I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

²⁷ How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!