

Session 3 – David on the run

It's not clear how long David was a fugitive. Based on the likelihood David was in his late teens (i.e. too young for military service) when he defeated Goliath and aged 30 when he became king (2 Sam 5:4), it's likely he was on the run for between 4 and 15 years. Which raises the question...

Why did David spend so long running from Saul, when God had promised he'd be king?

First (19:18) David fled to Samuel in Ramah a few miles N of Saul's hometown of Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin - probably to seek God about what to do next. From there David and Samuel went only a short distance to Naioth - a community of prophets. A 'comic' narrative in 19:19-23 tells how God's Spirit came upon groups of soldiers repeatedly sent by Saul to arrest David, such that they started prophesying. It even happened to Saul himself. Confirmation God was protecting David every step of the way. Maybe all the answer he needed.

Bible commentator Dale Ralph Davis: *'sometimes the clearest evidence God has not deserted you is not that you are successfully past your trial but that you are still on your feet in the middle of it.'*

See Psalm 59 written by David about this time - esp v9: As in his encounter with Goliath, David knew how to use his experience of God's protection to strengthen his faith for the present.

Relevance for us: *We may not have the significant role in God's purposes that David had, but we do still follow David's God. Do we, as His family, live under the same overall protection? Something to ponder as we continue through David's story.*

David's first mistake?

From Naioth, David went to Nob (21:1), a town for Levite priests (see Jos 21). David requested food and a weapon (v3&8) from the priest Ahimelek but lied (v2) about why he was there. That lie would lead to all the inhabitants and livestock of Nob being killed on the orders of Saul (22:6-19).

David's lie may have won him some protection but ultimately cost a lot of lives. Wouldn't God have protected David anyway, without David having to put the people of Nob in mortal peril?

Relevance for us: *While God will protect his own in order for His purposes to be fulfilled, that doesn't absolve us from responsibility for our actions. If we act contrary to God's ways, there will be negative consequences, which may affect others, if not ourselves. We should remember that before we jump too quickly to try to protect ourselves, or to try and solve our problems, without talking to God about them first.*

The real bad guy in all of this wasn't David, it was both Saul and Doeg the Edomite. Saul ordered the deaths. The king of Israel had become a monster prepared to massacre the people he was meant to care for and protect. And Doeg was the only one willing to carry it out.

From Nob, David fled to Gath (21:10) - Goliath's home city (17:4)! To pre-empt the Philistines taking revenge, he feigned insanity. See Psalms 34 & 56 for where he truly sought refuge:

Ps 34:8 'Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him'

Ps 38:11 'Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies.' (Had he learned that telling lies to save his skin was not the way to go?)

Ps 56:9 'my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I'll know that God is for me.'

But Achish king of Gath, had no desire for David to be there, mad or not. And so, David was forced to flee yet again (22:1) to the cave of Adullam back inside Israel in the territory of Judah.

From Psalms 57 & 142, written by David about this time in his life, you can feel the desperation and anguish in David's words. But he told himself to remain steadfast.

Ps 57:8 'Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.' commanding himself to worship God despite his troubles, reminding himself God is loving and faithful.

In the cave of Adullam David was finally joined by others (22:1-2). There were a motley crew of family, friends, outcasts and dissenters – but at least David was no longer alone.

David moved on again (22:3-4), this time to Mizpah in the kingdom of Moab. His aim was to ensure his parents were safe from Saul (David's great-grandmother Ruth had been a Moabitess). David wanted his parents to stay in Moab until, 'I learn what God will do for me'. Not at all sure how he was ever going to become king, but still expecting God would show him when the time was right.

So, where was God during this period of David's life and what was He doing?

David knew he had to wait for God to reveal how it was going to work out. And while he waited, he realised he was going to face severe testing of his character and his trust in God.

Such testing in the wilderness was experienced by many in the biblical accounts:

Adam & Eve - banished from Eden into a wilderness where childbirth and working the land be much harder, testing their trust in God (Gen 3).

Abraham & Sarah - endured years of nomadic life in the wilder places of Canaan, waiting for God to fulfil His promise to provide them with a son and permanent home (Gen 12-25).

Hagar, maid servant of Sarah - tested in the wilderness when she fled after mistreatment by Sarah and then again with Ishmael after the birth of Isaac (Gen 16 & 21).

Moses and the Israelites – 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai after escaping from slavery in Egypt, having to learn to trust God's protection and provision (Ex 16-34 and Lev-Deut).

David – tested regarding his trust in God's protection in the wilderness in his early life as a shepherd (1 Sam 17:28), on the run from Saul (1 Sam 23-26), and when he fled from his rebellious son Absalom (2 Sam 15-17).

Elijah – learning to trust God again in the wilderness of Judah after defeating the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel and then fleeing from Ahab & Jezebel (1 Kings 19).

The Jews in the time of Jesus – learning afresh about repentance from John the Baptist in the Judean wilderness (Mark 1).

Jesus – whose sense of identity and calling as God's Messiah was severely tested by the Devil while fasting in the wilderness (Luke 4).

Life in the power of the Spirit is not one great march of victory. It's a life-long struggle with times of testing in what can feel like a desert. But the wilderness doesn't only represent testing for the people of God, it also represents the presence, provision and protection of God.

For David, God was there every step of the way; ready to speak into his life when he asked for guidance; ready to form in him the character of a man after God's own heart; ready, in the face of whatever happened, however people treated him, to help him act with justice and love with mercy.

Relevance for us: *The concept of God testing our faith is not one we often discuss and yet seems to be a key part of how God works with those who seek to follow Him. We should expect our faith to be tested. When we experience times of stress and hardship, maybe we should be asking ourselves, 'What aspect of my trust in God might He be testing here and how might God want me to respond? How can I lean more on God through this, rather than try to work my own way out of the difficulties?'*

David learned from his experience with the city of Nob (ch 21). When the Philistines attacked the Israelites in Keilah, not far from where David was hiding (23:1-2), he first 'enquired of the LORD' about whether to go to their rescue. And again when his men were concerned about the risk (v3-4). And yet again when Saul planned to besiege Keilah in order to kill him (v10).

Relevance for us: *Should we expect to get the same immediate and explicit guidance that David got? Not necessarily. David's part in God's plan of salvation was far greater than yours or mine. But, David's God is the same God we follow.*

Our expectation of how God will guide our lives needs to be thoroughly rooted in a humility that recognises our role in God's purposes is not that of the major characters in the Bible. But we should also aim to root our lives in a habit of looking to God for what He wants to do each day. To be asking God at the start of the day, 'Is there someone you want me to pay attention to today?' 'Is there anything in particular you want me to do?'

David recognised the risk of being betrayed by his own people, and that relying on others for his protection could put them at risk. By seeking God's guidance, his actions spared the city (v13).

Saul pursued David, but David pursued God

David continued to move from place to place to avoid being captured (23:13). Saul was constantly seeking David, though 'God did not give David into his hands' (v14).

While Saul sought David, according to Psalm 63, David was 'earnestly seeking God... thirsting for God in a dry and parched land where there is no water... thinking of him through the watches of the night... singing in the shadow of his wings'. David used his time and energy to pursue God.

Relevance for us: *What or whom are we pursuing? How much time and effort do we put into seeking to be satisfied with God?*

Saul could not find David, but somehow Jonathan did and declared (v16-17), 'Don't be afraid. My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You shall be king over Israel, and I will be second to you.' God had chosen David as king and nothing would prevent that. But, there was no guarantee Jonathan would be second in the kingdom. Yet it seems Jonathan was looking not only for friendship with David but also the security and status that would come from being the best friend of someone so clearly blessed by God.

Relevance for us: *How often do we make assumptions about what will happen to us because of connections or friendships we've made? Such things count for little compared to what God has in mind.*

David's place of hiding was again made known to Saul, this time by the Ziphites, another Israelite clan (23:19-23). In Psalm 7 David agonised over such betrayal and whether it was because he had sinned against those who pursued or betrayed him. Yet he believed he'd acted rightly. He called on God to vindicate him and bring an end to the violence of the wicked. In Psalm 54:4 he declared 'Surely God is my help, the Lord is the one who sustains me.'

David refused two opportunities to kill Saul

When Saul stepped into a cave in which David was hiding, his men wanted David to seize the apparently God-given opportunity to kill his enemy (1 Sam 24:1-4).

Despite the fact he had spent many months, if not years, fleeing from Saul's anger, unable to trust even his fellow tribesmen not to give away his location to Saul, forever perilously close to being betrayed and killed, and despite God apparently giving David a promise to 'give your enemy into your hands to do with as you wish' (v4) David declared, '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' (v6). All the pain he had suffered still did not give him the right to act in that way.

This was another test of David's trust in God and his willingness to wait for God to bring Saul's reign to an end - and again, he passed it. This was why he was known as a man after God's own heart – he did not presume to bring about by his own actions what God had promised.

Compare this with the example of his forefather Abraham who made the mistake of trying to bring about God's promise of a son by having a child through Sarah's servant Hagar (Gen 16 & 21). Abraham learned through painful experience that doing so would not achieve God's purposes.

That understanding comes out clearly in David's second chance to kill Saul which came soon afterwards (ch26). Again refusing to seize the opportunity David declared 'the LORD himself will strike Saul, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed' (v10). Let God decide how Saul would die.

In-between these two stories of David sparing Saul's life is a rather different story (ch25). David encountered a wealthy but surly and mean Israelite called Nabal who refused to show the kind of hospitality to David and his men that was expected among the people of God.

In his anger at such rudeness, David planned to take revenge on Nabal, with 400 armed men to back him up. His tiredness, frustration and hunger spilled over into a fit of rage. Understandable perhaps. But coming between the two accounts of David refusing to do anything to endanger Saul's life it is a powerful reminder that holiness in how we relate to one person does not always translate into holiness in all our other relationships.

Nabal's wife Abigail was quick to intervene and prevent David from killing Nabal. What marks David out is that he was quick to admit and correct his faults when they were brought into focus.

First, he praised God for being the one behind Abigail's actions (v32).

Second, he prayed a blessing on Abigail herself for 'her good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed and for avenging myself with my own hands' (v33).

Relevance for us: *How often, when others point out a weakness in us, do we respond with praise to God and warm feelings towards the one who has critiqued our behaviour?*

So grateful was David for Abigail's actions that when Nabal died suddenly from a heart attack after hearing what his wife had done, David asked her to become his wife.

David back among the Philistines

Had he given up on ever being king of Israel?

He asked for a town where he and his men could shelter and was given Ziklag. To endear himself to the Philistines, he attacked enemies of Israel (Geshurites, Girzites & Amalekites) while telling the Philistines those raids were against Israelites and friends of Israel (27:8-12).

David's strategy appeared to backfire on him when the Philistine king ordered David and his men to join him in attacking Israel's army. Yet David trusted that God would show him a way out (28:2).

In the end it was the Philistine commanders who got cold feet over David being in their midst (v4), and so spared David having to go into battle against his own people.

But David's challenges were far from over. In his absence the Amalekites had attacked and destroyed Ziklag and taken all their wives and children captive. David's men talked of stoning him. But David 'found strength in God' (28:6) and again his response to difficult circumstances was to enquire from God what he should do.

An Egyptian slave helped them in their pursuit of the Amalekites in return for David swearing he would spare the slave's life. They defeated the Amalekites and rescued all the people and plunder that had been taken. David ensured everyone who'd helped him, not just in fighting Amalekites, but also in all the time he'd been in the wilderness evading Saul, got a share of that plunder. Such was his concern for people and sense of justice and generosity.

The Philistine army won their battle with the Israelites at Mount Gilboa and Saul and three of his sons (including Jonathan) all died. David learned of their deaths from an Amalekite who'd escaped from the Israelite army camp. The man claimed he'd been responsible for killing Saul at Saul's request. The claim was false, but David didn't know that. However, David ordered the death of the Amalekite for having no fear in lifting his hand to destroy the LORD's anointed (2 Sam 1:14).

To kill or not to kill?

Repeatedly, throughout his time on the run, David had had to address the issue of 'To kill or not to kill'. Twice with Saul, once with Nabal and his household, then with the Egyptian from the raiding party on Ziklag, and again with the Amalekite who reported Saul's death. There was also the issue of whether David's actions risked the death of the priests of Nob and the people of Keilah.

David was being tested by God. Would he look to God again and again for what he should do? Would he listen and obey God's instructions? Would he trust God to judge those who made life difficult for him, rather than taking it into his own hands? Would he cause bloodshed without God's approval? And would he patiently wait for God to fulfil the promises made to him?

Relevance for us: *Did God need to know the answer to these questions about David before he could be made king? Maybe. But then God probably already knew David would learn the right lessons and respond with repentance and faith.*

So, what is the point of God's testing? In David's case, perhaps it was so he knew God was at work in him, shaping him over time into a suitable person to carry out God's purposes. And perhaps also so that David knew himself better and lent more on God as a result.

The reasons God tests us may be similar. Will we, like David, learn those lessons and allow God to shape us into the person He wants us to be and through whom He can work?