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How Can You Trust a God Like This?

1 Samuel 30:1–31

The Thirty-Second Sermon on First Samuel

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How Can You Trust a God Like This? You’ve heard this objection to the Bible, to Christianity, or to Jesus, haven’t you? “How can you believe in a God who lets so much suffering on the streets happen?” “How can you believe in a God who makes salvation so exclusive?” “How can you believe in a God who says you can’t eat shellfish, who says disobedient children must be stoned to death, who says men must have beards and sideburns—how can you take such a God seriously, then, when he also says homosexuality is a sin?”

We’re living in a time of militant atheism—they even started their first atheist “church” up in L.A.— in a time of militant secularism, that is, of so dividing church from State, the public sphere from the private—in fact, in which even our President says we have the freedom of worship while our Constitution says we have the freedom of religion—and we’re living in a time of “in-your-face,” non-stop propaganda for alternative sexuality. The writing’s on the wall! So how can you continue to trust in a God like the God you say you trust in?

As we turn again to 1 Samuel this is one of the big questions that sticks out to me. As we’re reading the life of David we cannot help but empathize with him in his ups and downs, joys and sorrows. And having experienced an up in chapter

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29 as the Lord delivered him from having to fight alongside the Philistines against Israel, once again he experienced a total down in chapter 30. So this chapter gives us occasion to answer briefly the objection, “*How Can You Trust a God Like This?*”

1. *An Honest God*
2. *An Available God*
3. *A Gracious God*

May the Holy Spirit write these words upon the tablets of our hearts!

An Honest God

How can you trust a God like this? First, our text presents us with *an honest God*. I’ll explain. Look at the story first, though. Verse 1 takes place three days after chapter 29. As David and his men returned to their town, possessions, and families, something was terribly awry: **the Amalekites had made a raid against the Negeb and against Ziklag. They had overcome Ziklag and burned it with fire and taken captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great. They killed no one, but carried them off and went their way** (vv. 1–2). “Houston, we have a problem!” What was the response of David’s army? **David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep** (v. 4). And notice that the narrator specifically mentions to us the losses of David: **David’s two wives also had been taken captive, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel** (v. 5). And the narrator specifically mentions the response of the men to David: **And**

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David was greatly distressed—why?—for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters (v. 6).

So let me get this straight: God has just delivered David the soon-to-be-king and then right afterwards he lets David experience grief and loss? What kind of God is this? I thought you believed in a God who was good to his people? I thought you believed in a God who protected his people? As we read the story it feels like God is like a mean brother who puts out a treat in front of his little brother or sister to get them to come to over to him only to eat the treat himself once his brother or sister comes over! And to make matters worse, not only is everything burned and looted, but now David's very life is in jeopardy? Talk about going out of the fryer and into the fire!

So what's this all about? What I want to say to you this morning in response to the objection that we shouldn't or that our friends and loved ones can't believe in a God like this, is that we have an honest God. The Bible never portrays the life of faith as always having a smile. The Bible never says that as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ that you will have your best life now—contrary to the popular books in your local Christian bookstore or on Amazon. No! The Bible is raw and realistic. No! The Bible is hard and honest. No! The Bible is full of despair and doubt. No! The Bible is full of pain and problems. But this is why it is true! This is why we believe in the God it reveals!

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Martin Luther was once told in the midst of struggling with his sins and searching for real forgiveness that he just needed to love God more. Do you know what his response was? “Love God? Sometimes I hate him!” Shocking, right? But the Bible is not a mythological fairy tale of some never-never land far, far away. The Bible explains real life for us in a world that really was plunged into sin by a real man, Adam, who really ate a real piece of fruit that a real God really commanded him not to! And we, just like David, really struggle with faith. Just look back at David’s life in 1 Samuel 18 through where we are at this morning and then go read his psalms! We have an honest God. And because he is honest about what is before us in this life, he can be trusted when that life begins to unravel.

An Available God

So David’s men were about to stone him. Children, why do we as your parents tell you not to throw rocks at people? It hurts! In the Old Testament one of the ways people would kill another person was by throwing rocks at them because it was so painful. So you see here that David’s men and David wept until they had no strength. But while David’s men responded in anger at David, we read this in verse 6: **But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God** (v. 6). Wow! That’s not quite the reaction we expected, was it? Someone cuts you off on the freeway, what do you do? Someone says something about your mom, what do you do? You get the picture. David responded in a godly way because God was using all this anguish for his good. As one writer said “the awful disaster that befel David on

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his return to Ziklag was the means of restoring him to a trustful and truthful frame.”¹

So to the objection of how can we believe in a God who allows us to struggle and suffer so much—“I thought he was good? I thought he was powerful?”—I want you to see here also that we have *an available God*. Notice again in verse 6 where it says that David was greatly distressed. Don’t forget that we’ve been seeing in this latter half of 1 Samuel the constant contrast between Saul and David. Lo and behold we just read back in chapter 28:15 that this was the very feeling of Saul. In fact, it’s the same Hebrew word. Both men are in trouble, but both respond differently. How did Saul respond to his distress about the impending battle with the Philistines? By seeking the medium at En-dor. How does David respond? Again, as the end of verse 6 says, he despaired yet he strengthened himself in his God (v. 6).²

Notice the pronoun there: “*his* God.” It’s one thing to say you believe in God, as a general statement, but it’s quite another to say you believe he is *your* God, personally. It’s one thing to say you believe Jesus existed back in the first century, but it’s quite another thing to say that you have given your life to him and that you will follow him wherever he takes you! Children and young people: make Jesus yours by faith!

So how did David strengthen himself in his despair? Notice there are two things going on here. First, by calling God **his God**, he shows that he believed the

¹ Blaikie, 417.

² Brueggemann, 201.

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promises of God in the words of God. God made promises to David of being king and those promises have been kept in David's life as God kept David's life from death despite David's circumstances, feelings, and sins. So how did he **strengthen[...] himself in the LORD his God?** He used the Word of God. God was and is available in his Word. Secondly, he also utilizes the ephod from Abiathar high priest in verse 7. This is that strange apparatus that went over the priest's chest and was used in prayer to determine the will of the Lord. And that's what David does here. He **inquired of the LORD, "Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them?"** Then we read that the Lord **answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue"** (v. 8). How was God available to strengthen David in his despair? Through prayer. The Word and prayer, beloved. I think there's some sort of application here!

So in response to the Lord's availability through the Word and prayer David and his six hundred men went out to find the Amalekites (vv. 9–10). And we see another answer from the Lord to David's prayer in the Lord providing the means to find the Amalekites out in the middle of the desert. We read that **they found an Egyptian in the open country and brought him to David** (v. 11). After feeding him (vv. 11–12) David found out from him that he was a **servant to an Amalekite** (v. 13). What a coincidence! Then he tells David everything: **"We had made a raid against the Negeb of the Cherethites and against that which belongs to Judah and against the Negeb of Caleb, and we burned Ziklag with fire"** (v. 14). So David and he made a deal to find the Amalekites (vv. 14–15).

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A Gracious God

How can we believe in such a God as that of the Bible? Because we have a *gracious God*. Have you ever had that feeling of trying to express something you felt or something that happened to you, only to get that blank stare from the person you were telling it to? When people object to Jesus and we explain that at the end of the day we believe in him because he's saved us from our sins, we shouldn't expect the world to understand. God is gracious to us and the only way for a non-believer to understand this, is to experience this!

We see the grace of God in this story at the end, from verses 16–31. They find the Amalekites' camp, who are partying like it's 1999 (v. 16). And everything they took, David recovered. Ask yourself when this happened according to the text? David, who was as good as dead with his men preparing to stone him, found strength in God, then defeats his enemies, and as the rest of the text says, distributed gifts to his men (vv. 21–31). So when did this happen? According to verse 1, it was on the third day after David left the battle line of the Philistines.³ So there's death resurrection, conquest, and gifts.⁴ Can you see where I am going with this? David is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, our true King. All throughout the Old Testament there is what we might call a theology of third day, which brings with it the gracious gifts of God. In creation the third day brought forth land and plants (Gen. 1). On the third day Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac, whom Hebrews 11 says figuratively died and was raised to life (Gen. 22; Heb. 11). On the

³ Leithart, 162–163.

⁴ Leithart, 160–161.

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third day the Lord met with Israel on Mount Sinai and made his covenant with them (Ex. 19:11, 15-16). And after their exile, we are told that on the third day the Lord would raise up Israel again (Hos. 6:1-2).

This morning we celebrate the giving to us of the gifts of an elder and two deacons. Our gracious King and Savior makes himself available to us in these men because he honestly knows the struggles of our lives. And so he gives to us shepherds and servants for our difficult journey called the Christian life.

So how can we trust in a God like this? How can we not? Amen.