
In the Camp of the Enemy

1 Samuel 27²⁶

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Did you ever sort of wake up one day and wonder, “How did I get here?” We get into those places because of how we think. What seems at the time as entirely reasonable questions and wants take small steps that land us in difficult places.

This is a question for us in 1 Samuel 27.

Living with the Enemy

(v. 1-4)

How in the world does David end up with the Philistines again?

Struggling with Personal Doubt

(v.1)

David begins to doubt God, fearing that Saul will still try to kill him.

¹ Then David said in his heart, “Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand.”

He has done this before. He had gone to Achish and then had to deceive and dissemble in order to save his life. But the beginnings of this doubt can be seen in David’s challenge of Saul in 1 Samuel 26:17-20, NLT.

¹⁷ Saul recognized David’s voice and called out, “Is that you, my son David?”

And David replied, “Yes, my lord the king. ¹⁸ Why are you chasing me? What have I done? What is my crime? ¹⁹ But now let my lord the king listen to his servant. If the LORD has stirred you up against me, then let him accept my offering. But if this is simply a human scheme, then may those involved be cursed by the LORD. For they have driven me from my home, so I can no longer live among the LORD’s people, and they have said, ‘Go, worship pagan gods.’ ²⁰ Must I die on foreign soil, far from the presence of the LORD? Why has the king of Israel come out to search for a single flea? Why does he hunt me down like a partridge on the mountains?”

David basically fulfills his own prophecy. He is being driven from the place of the Lord’s abode. He is escaping for his life as he sees it. He has reached the end of his rope. Living on the run is wearying. His family is in danger. Twice he has had Saul as his mercy.

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Twice Sal has promised to leave off trying to hunt David down. All to no avail. So instead of continuing by faith to live the hard life God has called him to, he sees safety and relief in the land of, well, the enemy. Saul is bad, but not as bad as King Achish of Gath in Philistia.

When we hear ourselves saying, "There is nothing better for me to do..." time to pause. I am amazed at how often what follows that is not going to be pleasing to the Lord.

Woodhouse reminds us:

God's children must be careful not to yield to despondency. Moses was discouraged over his heavy workload and wanted to die (Num. 11:15), and Elijah ran from the place of duty because of fear and discouragement (1 Kings 19). When we start to look at God through our circumstances instead of looking at our circumstances through God's eyes, we will lose faith, patience, and courage, and the enemy will triumph. (Woodhouse, p. 146)

Seeking for Family Safety

(v. 2-4)

David moves his family and his army from Judah to the land of the Philistines.

² So David arose and went over, he and the six hundred men who were with him, to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath. ³ And David lived with Achish at Gath, he and his men, every man with his household, and David with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel, and Abigail of Carmel, Nabal's widow. ⁴ And when it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath, he no longer sought him.

We also can understand David's concerns. He has his growing family. He has over 600 warriors and their families. In addition there would all the support staff for a military unit of this size including armorers, supply train drivers and handlers and other camp support. He feels responsible for them and for their safety.

So he moves them, lock, stock and barrel, to Philistia. He goes back to the royal city of Gath where Achish rules as one of the Philistine lords. Gath was a good sized city for that day. Given what follows, David would certainly have asked for permission to either encamp outside the city or even to take residence inside its walls.

Saul gives up pursuing David. David is hard enough a quarry in the open wilderness. In the towns and countryside of Philistia David will be impossible to catch. And, Saul just might be thinking that this will be the end of David. Either the Philistines will figure out who he really is and kill him or David will destroy his future chances at becoming the king of Israel.

Serving as a Mercenary

(v. 5–12)

What David does next is both brilliant and baffling.

The Humble Request

(v. 5–7)

David approaches Achish and makes a request.

⁵ Then David said to Achish, “If I have found favor in your eyes, let a place be given me in one of the country towns that I may dwell there. For why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?” ⁶ So that day Achish gave him Ziklag. Therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day. ⁷ And the number of the days that David lived in the country of the Philistines was a year and four months.

His family and army with their families are putting serious strain on the capital city of Gath. So why not give David a town in the country where they can settle in manage themselves? This was a common arrangement. David was basically hiring himself and his men out to Achish as mercenary soldiers in return for a village to live in.

Made perfect sense to Achish so he gave David a village called Ziklag. This is quite a gift. This also was a permanent arrangement so that even up till through the rule of the southern kingdoms, Ziklag was a part of Israel. David and all that were with him settled into this village and lived for sixteen months. We are not told what that transition entailed. Certainly, David becomes the fief lord over this village. David brought the village new security and the market place much business.

The Military Raids

(v. 8-9)

David begins military operations in raids against the southern part of Israel. David and his men regularly raid the villages of pagan people living along the road to Egypt.

⁸ Now David and his men went up and made raids against the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites, for these were the inhabitants of the land from of old, as far as Shur, to the land of Egypt. ⁹ And David would strike the land and would leave neither man nor woman alive, but would take away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels, and the garments, and come back to Achish.

What is David doing here? He is raiding deep into the southern parts of Palestine. He attacks the peoples who have remained in the land that was given to Israel.

How can David justify this? I see two problems. We’ll take the easiest one first.

There is the strategic problem of raiding into areas not held by the Philistines. It appears that the Philistines did not hold those lands. David was conducting raids as a contract soldier for Achish of Gath not according to their contract. David is doing this, not because he has his present agreement with Achish in mind, but because he has his future domain in mind. More about that in a moment.

There is the moral problem of this kind of war¹⁰. David is wiping out every human being in the places he raids.

This is the one that is very difficult for moderns and for Christians in this age. The west has not conducted this kind of total war since WWII. There are several cities in Germany that were bombed totally into oblivion. We dropped two nukes on the Japanese. Men, women, children, pets and animals all died. We take great pains in modern warfare not to have collateral damage or death. To us, this sounds right and moral.

In the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites to conduct genocide against several of the nations or peoples living in Palestine. God had waited the 400 years that the Israelites were in Egypt until the evil and wickedness of the Canaanites was full. Their idolatry and perversions were such that I would not even name them with children present or in mixed company. So, the Lord decreed and commanded their total destruction. Brothers and sisters, that means that it was not wrong for Israel to do so. The sad fact is that Israel disobeyed God. They spared those nations and did not utterly destroy them. Mercy does not allow disobedience to God's clear will. The result was that every one of those peoples led Israel into idolatry and into rebellion against God.

I believe that David was simply executing the will of God. Now, he had his own reasoning. There is some indication from the Psalms that David understood what God had required and the dire effects of not doing what God commanded. Now, many disagree. Of conservatives (I put no stock in liberal or unbelieving disagreement) they treat this as morally wrong and an egregious sin against God. However, there is no condemnation of that in this text or in any other for that matter. The objections are all theological and ethical with the effect that they have in fact, condemned God's earlier commands during the conquest.

Should Christians then condemn this kind of warfare? The New Testament says nothing about it. Even in the condemnation of the wicked nations in the eschatological judgments, this is not part of the charges against them. So God at least allows nations to conduct this kind of warfare. No one has ever succeeded to totally wipe out a people group (in case you were wondering). Most of the people groups that have been wiped out in the modern era have been decimated by disease. You see, there is no such thing as a Christian nation. All nations are of this world and are pagan. And every authority has been put in place by God (Romans 13). We simply have to accept that. God is not seeking to establish a Christian nation. That is not what God is doing. God has sent us into the world with the gospel, not the sword. We may bear the sword as a part of the nation we are in just as Christians were soldiers in the New Testament church. We may have to make decisions for ourselves in what it means to serve in a nation's military.

Now, I know some of this is hard. We are not used to having some basic notions like this challenged. As Christians, we have a huge responsibility to take the gospel into all the people groups. God is saving His elect people from all the nations including among Jews. No one will die in a war outside of God's will and no elect person dies without being saved. Furthermore, it is right for our nation and nations like it to defend civilization, that is, governance by law, against the barbarians. The west may have to prosecute total war against them since they are doing it against us. And, at the same time, Christians are to be taking the gospel into all the people groups so that the Word of God is heard. Faith comes by hearing and the ability to hear by the Word of God. How will they hear unless they are told? How will they be told unless we go? How will they go, unless we send them? So we send our youngest, our brightest our best into the Muslim and Hindu and Communist countries. They may die. But the commissional taks of the church will be carried out.

What is the effect of this? David has secured the southern part of the country. He has wiped out a pestilent enemy who was never completely subjugated or wiped out. He has extended the occupation of the territory that was rightfully Israel's and thus David's future kingdom.

The False Reports

(v. 10–12)

David leads King Achish of the Philistines to believe that he is raiding Israelite villages.

¹⁰ When Achish asked, "Where have you made a raid today?" David would say, "Against the Negeb of Judah," or, "Against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites," or, "Against the Negeb of the Kenites." ¹¹ And David would leave neither man nor woman alive to bring news to Gath, thinking, "lest they should tell about us and say, 'So David has done.'" Such was his custom all the while he lived in the country of the Philistines. ¹² And Achish trusted David, thinking, "He has made himself an utter stench to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant."

King Achish regularly asks for reports from his hired gun. Where have you raided today? David never tells Achish what he is actually doing. He gives him general answers. He is raiding in the Negeb, which he is. He names large areas supposedly controlled by Israel. Certainly, Achish thinks David is raiding Jewish settlements and villages. David has intentionally misled Achish. Achish believes David's reports and is quite happy to have David do what is being done. Achish figures that by the time David is finished, he will be hated by the Israelites and will be permanently in service to the Philistines.

We also get some of David's motivation for his slaughter of those villages he raided. He wants no one left alive to report back to Achish where David actually is operating and what he is actually doing. So his killing of men, women and children is a military strategy of war. He is also saving his own life and that of his people.

Agree with it or not, David is misleading Achish. His reports may be factually true but they are in fact a deception. We have talked about this before in this and other series. The Bible does not seem to treat this as sin. Certainly there is neither commendation not

condemnation. We are simply told that David this. Once again, we need to be very careful about our overly sensitized moralism. If all deceit is sin, then a Christian could never be an undercover detective, wear camouflage as a soldier, participate in any spying or deceptive tactics, can never work in IT or Tech security, and so on. And think about the implications for every time a spouse or a child or a friend wants your opinion on their little drawing, their really crooked Lego blocks, their favorite but odd looking hat or the food on the table that, well, just doesn't quite measure up. You see what I mean? The ramifications for underground ministry are profound. Some ministry in certain parts of the world would be almost impossible without some level of misleading the authorities.

Now, if you have a sensitive conscience on this, then by all means never ever under any circumstances mislead someone. If that is what you believe, then you must live consistent with that belief. Otherwise you are sinning against your conscience.

Reflect and Respond

Man's wisdom often seems reasonable and best. It may even lead to brilliant successes. But it may lead to places and problems we could not possibly have anticipated. Seek to do God's will and rely on His wisdom.

David's fear and doubt and weariness show us the human side of this man of God. He had been told by the prophet Gad and reassured by Abigail and others that he should dwell in Judah. God was going to bring him to the kingship. But his distrust led to disobedience. He began to say things in his heart that caused him to rely on the wisdom of this world instead of doing the will and wisdom of God.

Our Lord Jesus was often stretched to the limits. He was tired, worn, misunderstood, pressed and was regularly evading verbal and physical traps. He had no home. He had many who followed Him and pulled at Him constantly. He had a betrayer, a doubter, a braggart and a firebrand in his entourage. At times he was down and discouraged but never ever did Jesus doubt or disobey. He simply took His Father at His Word, believed every promise and prophecy in the Scriptures and pleased God in every way.

We are called to trust God's Word with unfailing faith. Yes, we may be exhausted. Yes, the trial never seems to end. Yes, the afflictions are wearying and disheartening. Sometimes the burdens seem so much. Often the dangers and risks and stress are high. But God has promised to sustain us with unfailing grace. Trust in His Word. Rest in His strength.

¹⁰ I have avoided the term "genocide". That term has so many different understandings and is almost universally used in a negative sense. The effect would be to say, "God approves genocide." No, not in that sense. But has commanded in the past and may allow in the modern nations, a kind of total war that involves civilian casualties and collateral damage.