

From the Promise to the Prize, Part 2

1 Samuel 16 thru 2 Samuel 5:5

The minister had never heard of the old codger over whose funeral he now presided. Nevertheless, he heaped on the praise for the departed man. After ten minutes of describing the deceased as an exceptional father, a loving husband and a generous boss, the widow, whose expression had grown more and more puzzled, nudged her son: "Go up there and make sure it's your father."

Sometimes, we place biblical heroes on pedestals so lofty that their own families wouldn't know them. Tearing down heroes is mean-spirited, but glossing over their humanity has no teaching value. If we overlook the fallenness of its characters, the Bible becomes a mere library about the exploits of mythical icons. The great worth of the Bible is its testimony to God's faithfulness in spite of the sins of the people He loves and calls. Jesus alone was without sin. The Bible never whitewashes the flaws of any of its other major characters – even the great ones like David.

There is no greater Old Testament hero than David, king of Israel. In fact, this shepherd-king becomes something of a prophetic prototype for Jesus, our Good Shepherd and true King. David is called "a man after God's heart," but he was still a man. He was prone to despair, despondency, cowardice, deception, egotism and grievous sin. On the blackest day of his life, David orchestrated a man's death as a means of covering up the fact that he had impregnated the man's wife. No matter what shameful things any of us have done, I doubt any of us need to blush in the presence of David.

Last week, we reviewed how David was anointed to be Israel's king after God rejected the faithless Saul. David's calling was verified powerfully when he struck down the Philistine giant, Goliath. Other military successes followed. It seemed as if every step of this young shepherd's path toward Israel's throne might be as spectacular as the day he killed the giant. But that would not be the case.

King Saul thought he could nullify God's rejection of his royal line. He sought to kill David. The luster had worn off David's brilliant career as he found himself running for his life. Like David, we can become disillusioned. Our earliest experiences in Christ were powerful, but we soon find that we too have an enemy bent on destroying us. God provided David with a friend, Jonathan, Saul's own son, to encourage and protect him. Today, Jesus places believers in His church so that the Holy Spirit's encouragement and protection is available through fellowship with His community. The church is God's provision for the believer to help him to make it in a hostile world.

Saul's efforts to kill David ebbed and flowed at first. One day, Jonathan came up with a plan to signal David as to whether or not Saul was irreversibly resolute on killing him. Jonathan took a young boy into a field to shag arrows as David hid in earshot. If Jonathan told the boy, "You've gone too far. The arrow is behind you," David was safe. Instead, he said, "Keep going, the arrow is beyond you. Keep going! I mean it. Keep going! Run!" Jonathan sent the boy back to town and lingered in the field, not knowing if he would ever see his dear friend again. David came out of hiding, the two men shared a tender and tearful parting, and David was now officially on the run.

As he fled the murderous Saul, David would not always prosper. Sometimes, he relied on his own wits, and that's never a great plan for any of us. But, not every obstacle and hardship David would encounter was to be erected by the rabid older king. David made his own bad choices as well.

I. David, the Prevaricator

A. David Was Running for His Life

David's first stop as he fled Saul was Nob. There was no temple yet. Nob was where the tabernacle was erected and where the priesthood was headquartered. Ahimelech, the high priest, wondered why David was alone. David was either too afraid or too embarrassed to admit that he was running from for his life, so he told his first big fib: "I'm on a secret mission for the king." I believe Ahimelech saw through David. This alleged government operative had left home so abruptly, he had failed to even pack a sword, much less a shoe-phone or any other neat spy gadget. Earlier, David had left the sword of Goliath with this priest as a keepsake of that great victory. David now took it out of storage to carry for protection. Then, he fled to Gath in the land of the Philistines.

David was quickly recognized in Gath as the shepherd who had killed their giant. He feared that the local king would take vengeance, so he pretended to be nuts: "... while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard" (1 Samuel 21:13). Gath was not currently holding auditions for a village idiot, so he ran David off.

B. David Learned the Value of Trusting God over Himself

Three engines on a four-engine plane have gone out. The pilot emerges from the cabin with a parachute on his back and says, "Don't panic, I'm going for help!" We have many mechanisms for protecting our self-images when the truth may be that we are really just afraid, angry or sinful. One day, we will be done with such passions. For now, they are a part of our struggle toward maturity.

James wrote: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). But, rather than to build relationships where such healing can occur in safe and honorable ways, we hide behind plastic smiles and faces in fear that a confidence will be betrayed, or someone might think less of us. If we can bring ourselves to confess our sinful passions at all, we may spin the matter and justify our feelings, so that no one will be totally disgusted by us.

Because David forgot God's faithfulness and trusted in his own devices, he lowered himself. When we feel the need to resort to our own schemes rather than to seek God, we lower ourselves, we accomplish nothing and we only retard the process of real healing. David eventually came to his senses. In the aftermath of his mischief in Gath, he wrote Psalm 34 and vowed to honor God rather than to buckle to fear again:

¹²Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,

¹³keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.

¹⁴Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

¹⁵The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; - Psalm 34:12 15

II. David, the Pawn

A. The Ladies' Chorus No Longer Sang About David

There was a time when the woman in Israel sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." That hit hadn't been in the top forty for years. David gathered around him a small army of four hundred dubious characters, debtors and malcontents. Independent of Saul's official sanction, the future king began to protect Israel from foreign aggressors. This secured the loyalty of many Israelites, but not always a deep loyalty. David's actions only further enraged Saul.

When the Philistines attacked a town called Keilah, David sought the Lord's bidding to decide if he should take up this fight. The Lord said, "Yes," and David delivered Keilah in a rout. If Keilah had any gratitude, however, it was short-lived. Soon after the battle, Saul learned of David's whereabouts. David learned that Saul was ready to destroy Keilah if it did not hand David over. The Lord revealed to David that the people of Keilah would sell him out to save their own skins.

David had little time to dwell on Keilah's disloyalty. He fled to the desert of Ziph and hid in the hills there. The people of that area, the Ziphites, told Saul where David was. At least, it could be argued that the people of Keilah were just trying to save their own lives. The Ziphites were willing to exploit David's circumstance for no other reason than to curry favor with Saul.

B. The Praise of Man Is Always Fickle

Winston Churchill was once asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?"

"It's quite flattering," replied Churchill. "But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."

One obstacle to any believer's growth, but especially to budding leaders, is the desire to be liked and praised. The resolve to honor God needs to be a constant at our core. That may not bring applause. Praise from men is nice when it comes. Accept it with grace, but don't pursue it and never trust that it makes you right. We benefit from affirmation, but there is a significant difference between affirmation and praise. Affirmation comes from people close enough to us to also help us to see our flaws. It presupposes an established relationship of mutual trust and love. There is nothing reliable about the flattering strokes of the many who do not think in kingdom terms.

In his glory days, songs about his victories must have flattered David. A few years later, he learned that his countrymen were capable of selling him out. How alone David must have felt. He learned that he had to be constant in his devotion to God, because God was the only true constant in his life. Even good people can let us down if they are sufficiently tempted. Only God is incapable of ever failing us. Psalm 54 was written at this time when David was sold out by the Ziphites:

³Strangers are attacking me;
ruthless men seek my life - men without regard for God. *Selah*

⁴Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me. - Psalm 54:3, 4

III. David, the Patient

A. God Delivered Saul into David's Hands

David fled to En Gedi, a desert oasis with waterfalls for refreshment and caves in which to hide from Saul. David's four hundred men were greatly outnumbered by Saul's force of three thousand that was pursuing him. One day, in the very cave where David and his men were hiding, Saul entered to answer a "nature call." David sneaked up on the unaware king and cut off a corner of his robe, but as he showed the swatch to his men, he became ashamed of the thoughts he was entertaining.

The cloth in David's hand represented an end to the years of running. All he had to do was kill Saul, but instead, he chastised his men even as he chastised himself, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord" (1 Samuel 24:6). As Saul walked away from the hill, David stepped to the mouth of the cave and called to him. He denied any ambition of usurping Saul's kingship and told Saul that he was content to let God avenge the king's actions against him in His own time.

Driving a spear through the unsuspecting old king made sense to David's men. He was to be the next king. Saul was standing in the way. Besides, it would have been preventative self-defense. But, David knew that killing Saul would be a sinful short-cut to God's will. Long ago, God had reserved vengeance for Himself. David would not fail this particular test of his patience and character.

B. What Goes Around Comes Around – If God Wills

A baker in a little country town bought his butter from a nearby farmer. One day he suspected that the bricks of butter were not full pounds, and for several days he weighed them. He was right. They were short, and he had the farmer arrested. At the trial the judge said to the farmer, "I presume you have scales?"

"No, your honor."

"Then how do you manage to weigh the butter you sell?" inquired the judge.

The farmer replied, "That's easy, your honor. I have balances and for a weight I use a one-pound loaf I buy from the baker."

We yearn for justice. God is just. Justice is virtuous. But, every legal system that descends from the Law of Moses recognizes that judgments about justice are best left to parties uninvolved in the disputes, for when we seek our own justice, the line between justice and vengeance gets blurred. God established the principle of "eye for eye" so that Israel's judges could pronounce equitable restitution for the cases before them that involved damages. An objective judge could place a monetary value on a physical injury. Without judges and "eye-for eye" restraint, God's nation would have been filled with unjustified blood-feuds and exaggerated acts of vengeance.

David knew that he could not distinguish real justice from his lust for vengeance in regard to all that Saul had put him through, so he left the matter to the perfect Judge. This event inspired Psalm 57:

⁴I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts –
men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.

⁵Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth. – Psalm 57:4, 5

David could have trusted the strength of his own hand and his own timing. Instead, he reasoned that while killing Saul may have held up under human scrutiny, it would not have exalted God.

IV. David, the Praiser

A. One Day, the Running Would Be Over

David's days as a refugee would last for several more years, but that incident in the cave marked a turning point. David would have another chance to kill Saul. He walked right up to the king while he slept. His friend, Abishai, thought that pinning Saul to the ground with his own spear would be poetic justice, but this time David did not even consider it. Saul was never again a serious threat. Saul continued his own dismal downfall while David was content to write songs.

A young man was a slow worker and found it difficult to hold a job. The employment office sent him to the local zoo. The zoo's director, aware of his limitations, put him in charge of feeding the tortoises. Later, the director dropped by to see how the young man was doing and found him standing by an empty enclosure with the gate open. "Where are the tortoises?" he asked.

"I can't believe it," said the new employee, "I only opened the door a little bit, and whoosh, they were gone!"

Sometimes, it seems that David was a bit slow in learning the lessons God was teaching Him. As a young shepherd, he was **anointed** to be king, but he wasn't **ready** to be king. How could any man really learn to shepherd God's people until he first learned what it meant to be shepherded by Him Who cares most deeply about us? David was still in the process of learning to believe God in all things, to obey God in all things, and ultimately, to praise God in all things. God's faithfulness to David throughout this period that Saul was trying to take his life resulted in one more psalm:

¹I love you, O LORD, my strength.

²The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

³I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies. - Psalm 18:1-3

B. Praise under Fire Is a Remarkable Witness to the Sufficiency of God

The first line of John Piper's book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, says, "Missions exists because worship does not." We spend much time attempting to program and mechanize the growth of the kingdom under such headings as evangelism and missions - things which in fact, could not even be hampered if all believers took their faith seriously and lived for the glory of God. Piper's premise is that where people live lives characterized by the praise of God, they are truly "light to the world."

One solitary life that finds a basis for praise in everything - good and bad times, prosperity and poverty, sickness and in health - is of great worth. The life of praise is what will enable God to move into the lives of those around you. The life of praise expressed in faith, hope and love is what seizes the attention and the imagination of hurting people who are hungry for spiritual rest.

From this preacher's perspective, the ability to praise God while hiding in a cave is one of David's most endearing qualities. The reason believers through the centuries have found such strength in his psalms is because here was a man who was honest enough before God to articulate the same kinds of fear, anger and struggles that we endure but don't like to admit. David gives voice to the things we feel. Not every psalm of David neatly resolves itself. Some seem to be just an occasion for him to unload his heart. But in the midst of those, many others, if they do actually find relief, at least identify the pathway to relief - and that is to praise God, trusting that He will make all things right.