

1 Samuel 29: Dangerous Devotion

Introduction: Saul's Obsession

Chapter 29 explains how David's relationship with the Philistines came to an end. Chapter 28 jumps into the future, the last 24 hours of Saul's life, to explain why we need to know this. Chapter 28 shows us Saul as a doomed man and Chapter 29 shows us how Saul's last hope, David, was removed from the scene at an earlier stage of the build-up of the Philistine army so as to leave Saul utterly God-forsaken. In Leviticus 20:6 God declares: "If a person turns to mediums and wizards, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people." As Chapter 29 indicates, God was already drafting Saul's death warrant, but in Chapter 28 Saul signed his own death warrant when denied any revelation from God he turns to a medium.

A man once went to a séance and as the medium was trying to summon one of the man's deceased relatives she suddenly burst into laughter. Immediately, the man slapped her face. Horrified, another participant asked him, "Why did you do that?" He retorted, "Because I always like to strike a happy medium."

Saul could never be described as a man who struck a happy medium. Not only does he resort to forbidden extremes when seeking God's guidance, but the preceding chapters have stressed how obsessed he is with the need to kill David.

Chapter 29 is a wonderfully rich chapter, laced with irony and humour. As is skilfully brought out through the mouths of Achish and the Philistine commanders, David still sees himself as Saul's devoted servant, even though, as the preceding chapters have stressed, Saul is gripped with an unstoppable obsession to kill David. As the Philistine commanders correctly perceive, David was prepared to kill Philistines to save Saul.

Recently I saw the currently screening Chinese movie called Wu Xia. I'll try not to give too much away. The central character is a seemingly ordinary villager who works in the fields and makes paper around the year 1917. He has a happy family, a lovely wife and two boys. He becomes a local hero when two highly vicious killers die in a struggle in which he is involved. A detective becomes convinced that this simple villager must himself be a trained killer who came to this village to escape justice. The detective becomes obsessed with proving he is right to the point of relentlessly persecuting this good man, who clearly loves his wife and children. Eventually we come to a scene in the forest when the villager is alone with the detective. In his fear the detective promises he will not return to persecute the villager. But by now we know he will never leave this poor man alone. Tension is very high at this point in the movie because now the villager has the perfect opportunity to bring this persecution to an end. All he has to do is kill the detective.

Saul is very much like this obsessed detective. David has had not one, but two opportunities to end it all. If this was a movie rather than a book many watching would think, "Kill him! It's the only way to stop Saul." But David will not do this. On the last occasion Saul makes an empty promise much like that of our obsessed detective. At 26:21 we read: "I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again."

Whenever you encounter direct speech like this in the Bible pay very close attention. It is the key way of helping us to understand the person behind the words. We know Saul is very sincere when he says these words. But by now we also know that Saul belongs to the dark side; that he is being driven along by the evil spirit that has him in his power. Saul is incapable of transforming himself.

A surgeon returned some books he had borrowed back to the librarian. After checking them, the shocked librarian asked,

“Sir, why have you ripped out the last pages of each of these books?”

The surgeon replied, “I can't stop myself from removing an appendix whenever I see one.”

So at the beginning of Chapter 27 David, knowing Saul cannot stop himself – finds refuge with Achish, the king of the Philistine territory Gath. Chapter 29 continues on with the story of David's relationships with the Philistines. But between Chapters 27 and 29 we have a sudden interruption. We are propelled into the future – the last 24 hours of Saul's life.

1. David's Devotion and Saul's Doom

Chapter 28 ends with Samuel telling Saul that both he and his sons will die in the battle that will take place the next day.

Look at the first instances of direct speech used in 1 Samuel 29. When the Philistine commanders see David and his men with Achish they ask, “What are these Hebrews doing here?” They spit out the word “Hebrews” like a swear word, full of racial hatred. Achish replies, “Is this not David, the servant of Saul, king of Israel, who has been with me now for days and years, and since he deserted to me I have found no fault in him to this day.” Achish says more than he realises. He describes David as “the servant of Saul, king of Israel.” He means that David once was Saul's servant but now is his servant instead. In reality David still considers himself to be the servant of Saul; still accepting and respecting Saul as the king over Israel appointed by God. There are actually a lot of parallels between Achish and Saul. Both of these kings radically misread David. Saul convinced himself that David was set on taking over the throne and treated David as a threat to be removed, when all the time David was the most loyal servant he could possibly have. Achish convinced himself that David was his most loyal servant, someone he could trust with his very life. While we know that ruthless David would not hesitate to kill Achish if the right set of circumstances presented themselves. Modern readers, given our cultural sensibilities, raise their eyebrows when they see David pretending to be Achish's servant while secretly sacking Philistine villages, while persuading Achish he had been raiding Israelites, making himself despised by them. But the ancient reader would chortle with amusement at the way these Philistines, often presented as chumps in these books, are so easily duped. Modern readers' respect for David tends to drop as we disapprove of his use of deception. Ancient readers' respect for David would skyrocket as they marvelled at his skill and cunning, his Academy Award performances, his ability as a leader to control the tongues of his own people and even surreptitiously continue the conquest of Canaan.

Let's not miss the central point that is implicit in the writer's recording of Achish's response at 29:3: However undeserving Saul may be David is still “the servant of Saul, king of Israel.” The Philistines are painfully familiar with the song sung by Israelites: “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” They throw these lyrics back in Achish's face to rightly say that David and

Saul are in synch – any slaughtering done by Saul will be augmented by an even greater slaughter done by David. There is an amusing pun in verse 4. The commanders of the Philistines reprove Achish saying, “Send [David] back, that he may return to the place to which you have assigned him. He shall not go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become an adversary to us. For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his lord? Would it not be with the heads of the men here?” The Philistine commanders see what Achish does not see that for David Saul is still “his lord” and so he would not hesitate to lop off their heads in the midst of the battle. The pun is with the word “heads.” Go back to 27:2. There Achish, duped into believing David is now loyal to him, says, “I will make you my keeper of the head for life.” Yes, the word translated “bodyguard” is literally “keeper of my head.” Can’t you hear Jewish readers laughing their heads off? Excuse the pun. After all, who is Achish? He is the king of Gath. Don’t you remember that David lopped off the head of none other than the giant Goliath of Gath? Now this idiot of a king is willing to trust David to keep his head on his shoulders. The Philistine commanders, by contrast, are not so stupid.

But again keep in mind what is being emphasised through the mouths of pagans. David is indeed Saul’s loyal servant. On two prior occasions David has spared Saul’s life. Chapter 28, jumping into the future, has emphasised that Saul is a doomed man. But if David and his mighty men are on the battle field then there is still hope for Saul. So Chapter 29, by removing David from the scene, underscores the reality of Chapter 28. Saul’s doom is irreversible.

Do you submit to God-given authority? Saul was trying to kill David and still David recognised Saul as his rightful king for whom he was willing to risk his own life. Yet for relatively trifling reasons we have church-hopping Christians constantly refusing to accept the authority of leaders God has placed. In this supermarket age be counter-cultural. Continue to accept God-given authority in the church even if at times it gets under your skin.

2. David’s Devotion and Divine Deliverance

God’s providence here is quite astonishing. In his desperation Saul sought God’s direction in vain and then he sought it in an illegitimate way. By contrast, David’s life is under God’s direction even when he does not seek it directly. By removing David from the scene God does not merely succeed in leaving Saul to his inevitable fate. But also God makes it clear that David had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the fall of Saul. As we read on in 2 Samuel we see that there were indeed Israelites caught up in Absalom’s rebellion who believed the lie that David had conspired to bring about Saul’s downfall in order to make himself king. God’s Word here in 1 Samuel 29 is written to vindicate David and, indeed, to show from what is recorded in the next chapter, that David was in fact about 150 kilometres away when the battle between Saul and the Philistines was waged.

The rough pattern described here recurs in the life of Jesus. Just as Saul sought the life of David so the Jewish religious leaders sought the life of our Lord. Just as Saul was David ended up under foreign authority that had no real control over him, so Jesus ended up before Pilate telling him, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” Just as Saul was doomed, so too Jerusalem whose crowds shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Just as Saul’s fate was sealed when the foreign powers that would destroy him removed David from the scene, so too Jerusalem’s fate was sealed when the Roman powers that would destroy it removed Jesus from the scene by consigning him to his death. Just as David’s removal from the scene was followed by him ruling gloriously over God’s people, so too Jesus’ removal by crucifixion was followed by his glorious rule.

Just as Achish failed to see that David was poised to become Israel's greatest king, so too Pilate thought it was a joke to think of the weak, humiliated Jesus as the king of the Jews and shared his joke with everyone by having a placard stating this above Jesus' head on the cross.

Achish says to David, "As surely as the LORD lives you have been reliable." God is only mentioned twice in this chapter and both times it is Achish who speaks of him. Achish is expressing his mistaken belief that David has been trustworthy as his servant, whereas David has been sacking Philistine villages instead of the villages of fellow Israelites, as Achish had believed. Yet Achish is right in what he says, without realising it. The LORD indeed lives and David has been his reliable servant. David has remained devoted to the Lord as expressed in his avoidance of compromise in his relationship with the Philistines and also in his attitude towards Saul, whom David regards as the Lord's anointed.

If you have any aspiration to be a leader then learn from David that to be a great leader you first need to be a good follower.

When Achish says, "As surely as the LORD lives" he is using the same oath sworn by Saul in Chapter 28. When the medium realised she was dealing with Saul she feared for her life. He responded, "As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this" (28:10). Saul's relationship with God and his ability to see what is right is as hopeless as that of Achish.

Not only do we hear the same words coming out of the mouths of Achish and Saul. Both kings made David their personal "keeper of the head", bodyguard. Both were impressed with David's fighting abilities. Both ended up removing him from the ranks of their armies. Both were responsible for David living in southern Judah. Both of them badly misjudged David. When Saul was made Israel's first king they wanted a king of the same type they saw operating in other nations. The similarity of Saul to Achish indicates they got what they wanted.

Aren't you impressed by David's protestation of innocence in verse 8: "But what have I done? What have you found against your servant from the day I came to you until now? Why can't I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?" David is having his own private joke at Achish's expense. He is implying that Achish is as blind as a bat, not having cottoned on to what David has really been doing while supposedly acting as Achish's servant. And how humourous is David's last question: "Why can't I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?" Achish thinks David wants to fight against his fellow Israelites and that by "my lord the king" David is referring to Achish. But we know David sees Saul as his lord and king and even more profoundly God himself. David wants to go with Achish and the other Philistines so that he can act like a fifth column and kill the Philistines themselves, the enemies of Saul his king. But any ideas David has of rescuing Saul have no traction because God has already sealed Saul's fate. David needs to be removed from the scene so that after Saul dies, as he must, David cannot legitimately be accused of conspiring to usurp the throne. Ironically, the Philistines who succeed as God's agents in killing Saul simultaneously act as God's agents to prepare the way for his successor as a king who will pose a vastly greater threat to them.

After David's protestations Achish says, "I know that you have been as pleasing in my eyes as an angel of God." The word "angel" is the word "messenger." Achish likes David because David has been telling him what he most wanted to hear and he particularly wanted to hear that David despised and was despised by his own people. Achish deserves to be duped into likening David to an angel of God when he so hates the people to whom God ministers with his angels.

Let's finish where both chapters 28 and 29 end, with Saul and David leaving. There is another striking point of contrast between Saul and David. Chapter 28 leaves with Saul going into the blackness of night. Chapter 29 leaves with David going into the light of a new day. When you leave here will you leave like Saul or David? Are you like Saul? Do you belong to the dark side? Are you alienated from God, under his wrath and judgment? Will you leave here to go into the blackness of night? Or are you like David, enjoying God's favour and grace? Will you leave here to go into the light of an ever-renewed life? It all hinges on your relationship with Jesus. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Are you on the wrong side of the bridge, the side where only death and disaster awaits you? It's time to cross over. Don't be like Saul looking in the wrong places for direction. Hear Jesus' word. Can you see him on the other side of the bridge with arms wide open, ready to welcome you? Go to him. Cross the bridge. Place your entire life in his hands. Go into the light.