

1 Samuel 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 26 Then the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, Is not David hiding himself on the hill of Hekailah, which is on the east of Deshaimon?

So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand chosen men of Israel to seek David in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul encamped on the hill of Hekailah, which is beside the road on the east of Deshaimon.

But David remained in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, David sent out spies and learned that Saul had indeed come. Then David rose and came to the place where Saul had encamped.

And David saw the place where Saul lay, with Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army. Saul was lying within the encampment, while the army was encamped around him. Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?

And Abishai said, I will go down with you. So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head.

[1 : 05] And Abner and the army lay around him. Then Abishai said to David, God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice.

But David said to Abishai, Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? And David said, As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish.

The Lord forbid that I should put out my hand against the Lord's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head, and the jar of water, and let us go. So David took the spear and the jar of water from Saul's head, and they went away.

No man saw it or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen upon them. Then David went over to the other side, and stood far off on the top of the hill, with a great space between them.

And David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, Will you not answer, Abner? Then Abner answered, Who are you who calls to the king? And David said to Abner, Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel?

[2 : 18] Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the lord's anointed.

And now see where the king's spear is, and the jar of water that was at his head. Saul recognized David's voice, and said, Is this your voice, my son David? And David said, It is my voice, my lord, O king.

And he said, Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant.

If it is the lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering. But if it is men, may they be cursed before the lord. For they have driven me out this day, that I should have no share in the heritage of the lord, saying, Go serve other gods.

Now therefore let not my blood fall to the earth away from the presence of the lord. For the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains.

[3 : 23] Then Saul said, I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake.

And David answered and said, Here is the spear, O king. Let one of the young men come over and take it. The lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness.

For the lord gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the lord's anointed. Behold, as your life was precious this day in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the lord, and may he deliver me out of all tribulation.

Then Saul said to David, Blessed be you, my son David. You will do many things and will succeed in them. So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

1 Samuel chapter 26 very closely parallels the content of chapter 24. There is a feeling of déjà vu. Indeed, the first verse almost repeats word for word what was given to us back in chapter 23 verse 19.

[4 : 28] The Ziphites go to Gibeah and inform Saul about David's being in pretty much exactly the same location. The parallels with chapter 24 are quite striking. First, Saul is informed about David's location.

Then he takes 3,000 chosen men. David has the opportunity to kill Saul. Saul is in a state of blindness, the blindness of darkness on the first occasion in the cave, and then the blindness of sleep on this occasion.

David's men encourage him to take Saul's life, and he resists. Unbeknownst to Saul, David takes something of Saul's that symbolises his royal authority.

From a distance, David declares that he has saved Saul, not taking his life into his hands, and gives proof. Saul uses the expression, Is that your voice, David my son? David compares Saul's pursuit of him to pursuing a flea.

Saul confesses his sin and declares that David will be blessed, and then they both go their own way. Things are playing out almost exactly the same way as they did previously. However, when stories largely repeat in scripture, they never exactly repeat.

[5 : 34] We need to be alert to the differences that we can observe. David now goes out to Saul's camp, rather than Saul unwittingly coming into his camp in the cave. Perhaps the greatest difference here involves the role played by Abner, the son of Ner.

This time Saul is not alone. He's surrounded by Abner and his army. He's not just covering his feet in the cave. Abner is, in many respects, David's replacement. He's Saul's right-hand man, the commander of his army.

That's the position that David should have occupied. And so David's challenge to Abner is a challenge to someone who is some sort of counterpart. All of the people are asleep, and David and Abishai go over to the camp.

This might remind us of Gideon and his servant going to the camp of the Midianites at night, or Jonathan and his armour-bearer going over to the camp of the Philistines. We are here introduced to Abishai as well, one of the famous sons of Zeruiah.

He is a brother of Asahel, and even more famously, of Joab. James Jordan has remarked upon the way that the camp of Saul is described, and he suggests that there might be an allusion to the Garden of Eden.

- [6 : 41] The spear stuck in the ground at the head of Saul is like a tree. As we've seen, it is the stick that represents Saul, like Aaron or Moses' rods represented them.
- There's also a jar of water connected with the spring or the well that you would find in the garden. Saul is with the tree in the very centre of the garden. Abishai wants to pin Saul to the ground, as Saul had tried to pin David to the wall, but David prevents him.
- David recognises the appropriateness of judgement against Saul, but it isn't something to take into his own hand. It's to be left to God. God will judge in Saul's case. And the Garden of Eden themes are important here.
- Saul is like the forbidden fruit, and the temptation to David is to stretch forth his hand and to take the office of Saul. Parallels to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil might be worth exploring here.
- The tree was a tree associated with judgement and rule. The promise was that you would be like gods, knowing good and evil, having authority within the world, the authority of judgement, being like one of the powers in the divine council.
- [7 : 47] However, that is forbidden fruit. It belongs to God to give in the appropriate time. This wouldn't be the first time that we've seen themes of Adam in this story, and it won't be the last. Saul was a sort of Adam when he fought against Nahash, the serpent.
- David was a sort of Adam when he fought against Goliath, another serpent figure. Saul is like Esau, but also like Adam. He rebels against his heavenly father, and he takes the forbidden fruit.
- David, however, is faithful where Adam and Saul were not. The reference to deep sleep here might also recall the story of Eden. There are only three occasions in the narrative parts of scripture where deep sleep is mentioned.
- It's mentioned in the story of Abraham as he's placed in a deep sleep, and the Lord appears to him in a vision. And then it's mentioned, of course, back in chapter 2 of Genesis, where the woman is created from the side of the man.
- When David reveals his identity to Saul and his men, he speaks particularly to Abner. Abner is judged for his failure to guard his master. The judgement is given concerning him.
- [8 : 49] You deserve to die. This is similar to the judgement upon Adam. Adam failed to guard the garden. Abner failed to guard his master. Of course, who should be guarding Saul?
- David. We learnt back in chapter 22 that Saul had set David as the captain over his bodyguard. And now without David, his life was put in danger.
- While, as we have noticed, there are a lot of similarities between this story and that of chapter 24, David's address to Abner suggests that the focus has slightly shifted.
- Saul once again acknowledges his fault. However, as we've seen from Saul, there is lots of remorse for what he has done, and certainly for the consequences, but very little repentance and true change of life.
- David has shown his power to take the spear, but he returns it to Saul. And Saul invites David to return, to become his servant once again, but David does not do so. David has learnt by now that Saul is fickle.
- [9 : 48] He will seem to repent, but it won't stick. Once again here, there are also elements that might remind us of the blessing of Jacob by Isaac. Saul once again is like Isaac.
- He asks whether the voice is the voice of David. He is deceived in his blindness, in the darkness and then in sleep, and something is taken from him, and then he ends by giving a blessing.
- A question to consider. What might we learn from looking at the three stories of David's resistance of temptation that occur in succession from chapter 24 to 26?

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