

Thriving Not Surviving

1 Samuel 23:1-14; 25-29

Paul Cannings, D.Phil.

A. Do the Right Things (v. 6):

1. It came about, to be – After consulting with God and getting God’s approval to fight the Philistines, David is now confronted with another issue. He did what was expected of him as a commander and, therefore, protector of God’s people only to encounter Saul, whose only purpose is to kill him rather than compliment him for doing a good job.

a) Philistines were “robbing the threshing floors” (23:1). This confirms the fact that the Philistines were originally sea-robbers who depended on plundered goods for their living (cf. 4:1b). These “sea-robbers” harassed the coastline as far as Latakia. Recent archaeological activity has revealed that it was they who destroyed the ancient city-states of Ugarit and Ebla, whose civilization had great influence on the history of early Israel.^[1]

b) This gave David the function of the judges, who “saved” Israel from those who plundered them (Judg 2:16 and often). David’s men admitted their fear even in the heartland of Judah. How much worse it would be if they would have to fight in contested territory near Keilah, where they would have to face the battle ranks of the Philistines. While the word “ranks” seems to be a bit strong for the Philistine raiding party that must have been involved, the word brings out well the terror felt by David’s men. Hence we decided not to amend the text on the basis of LXX (contra McCarter). The Philistine battle ranks were mentioned ten times in chap. 17.^[2] For David it was not how difficult the circumstances were, it was doing what God called him to do.

c) The Philistines were David’s enemy and the enemy of Israel, so it was right for him to fight them. When the child of God is in the will of God, he may expect the help of God. So intense was Saul’s hatred that he did not thank God for David’s victory, but instead came to fight the victor himself. And the men of Keilah did not protect their

deliverer; rather, they tried to turn him over to Saul! How wicked is the human heart untouched by the grace of God!^[3]

2. Abiathar, the Son of Ahimelech, fled After Saul used Doeg the Edomite to kill all the priests, Abiathar ran rapidly to David, who responded with care because Saul killed the priests because they helped David.

a) The son of Ahimelech, son of Ahitub, priest of Nob. He escaped (1 Sa 22:20) Saul's slaughter of the priests there after Doeg the Edomite (21:7 [MT :8]) informed against Ahimelech (v. 2) for having given food to the fugitive David. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition, Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. All rights reserved.)

d) The only mention of Abiathar in these two chapters is in 22:20, where he is the survivor who fled after David. David, feeling indirectly responsible for bringing the priests of Nob under Saul's wrath (cf. 22:22), became Abiathar's protector. Abiathar repaid this with loyal service to David throughout the latter's life.

3. Come down with an ephod in his hands - Abiathar ran down with an ephod, blessing David with the opportunity to seek God's divine will, which David did repeatedly, unlike Saul.

a) Abiathar's ability to make oracular inquiries for David stands in stark contrast to Saul's lack of divine guidance.^[4]

B. Present Danger (vs. 7-8):

1. When it was told to Saul – When Saul's messenger continually kept explaining to Saul, making it vividly clear (most likely a spy) that David was in Keilah, Saul became excited. He assumed he had David trapped.

a) When Saul hears that David is in Keilah, the fortified city, he believes that David has thus made a strategic mistake and takes it as an indication that “God has given him” into Saul’s hand (v. 7). In a fortified city people can withstand outside attack provided they have plenty of provisions and a strong army. David had neither of these. Saul is therefore confident of capturing David. However, Saul forgets the fact that the LORD is with David.^[5]

2. David had come to Keilah—When David obeyed God and went to Keilah, he was fully engaged in completing the mission the Lord sent him to accomplish.

3. David had come to Keilah – When we obey God's will to serve His people's needs, it does not mean we would have a reprieve from those who hate us. Our success may upset them more.

4. Saul said, “God has delivered him into my hand” – Saul repeatedly kept verbalizing before all around him that God apprehended David for Saul so that Saul could control David’s fate. – When David’s men knew that David could have killed Saul, they said God had delivered Saul into David’s hands (1 Samuel 24:3-5).

a) Saul mistakenly believed that God (not Yahweh!) had delivered David into his hands since his rival had entered a city with two doors sealed by a bar, in which he would presumably be much easier to trap than in the open spaces of Judah. Instead of rejoicing in the salvation which Yahweh had given to Keilah, Saul tried to take advantage of David’s tactical mistake. He called out (for the verb, see also 15:4) *all* his troops in order to put David and his 600 (see v 13) men under siege. As the word order in v 9 makes clear, David recognized that Saul was plotting against *him* and not, as would be expected, against *the Philistines*^[6]

5. Saul said, “God has delivered him into my hand” – It is interesting how sin can so darken our minds that even when we know we are doing wrong, we can convince ourselves God is blessing us when our circumstances seem favorable. Interestingly, we can close the Bible and lean to our own understanding.

a) Not every opportunity is sent from God. We may want something so much that we assume any opportunity to obtain it is of divine origin. As we see from Saul's case, however, this may not be true. An opportunity to do something against God's will can never be from God because God does not tempt us. When opportunities come your way, double-check your motives. Make sure you are following God's desires and not just your own.^[7] The same things David's men would say (24:4).

b) In order for Satan to deceive us, he makes circumstances look like an act of God (2 Corinthians 11:12-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:9).

6. Summoned all the people for war – Saul continually demanded that every warrior give him their full attention to understand what they must accomplish as ordered.

7. Summoned all the people for war – When Satan desires to come against us, he musters up as much force as he can find because he knows the battle belongs to the Lord. We “don't wrestle with flesh and blood...” (Ephesians 6:12). It is never one dart that is going to be “flaming arrows” (Ephesians 6:16). Look at the crowd seeking to kill Jesus.

a) The question and its answer highlight the ungratefulness of the citizens of Keilah and the nobility of David. “Yes, they would hand him over,” the ephod revealed, even though, the reader might add, David had just saved this city from pillaging by the Philistines. On hearing the divine answer, David made good his escape. What could his 600 men do in a pitched battle against “all the soldiers” (v 8) of Saul? David's pell-mell flight continued as he and his men wandered wherever they chose (v 13). Since David was no longer confined to one city, Saul called off his pursuit.^[8]

8. To go down to besiege – All the men of war were required to go down and enact a strategic war plan that would be oppressive and aggressive against whoever, including the residents in Keilah, would stand in Saul's war of killing David. The very people he was supposed to protect meant nothing to him, not as well as the very person, David, who protected them against their true enemy.

a) Saul showed himself unfit to be king, because he had attacked one of his own cities; David was already doing a king's task, in defeating his nation's enemies, the Philistines.^[9]

C. Ever Present (vs. 9-12):

1. David knew that Saul – David became fully and continuously aware of what Saul was planning to do. God may not spare us from trouble, but He can certainly keep us from harm.

a) David is more clever than Saul (cf. v. 22); he has informants in Saul's court (cf. 20:9, 13). He gets prior information about Saul's plots and escapes from Keilah before Saul "comes down." In v. 11 the first question should come after the second; we find it again in v. 12, so in the first occurrence it is a duplication caused by error. That David had a small army of "six hundred" (v. 13) during his fugitive days was well established in tradition (cf. 25:13; 27:2). Of these only four hundred were in active combat; the other two hundred "remained with the baggage" (25:13; 30:10). Those who went to the battle and those who remained with the baggage shared the spoils of the battle equally (30:24; cf. Num. 31:27). This Davidic tradition appears to have influenced the Saul traditions also (cf. 1 Sam. 13:15b; 14:2).^[10]

2. Was plotting evil against him. Upon defeating Israel's enemy, David sensed that Saul was devising a scheme against him that violated the Word of God. Saul, believing God was doing this for him, is sinning against God while trying to kill David. The Bible says that those who practice sin practice lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

a. No matter the distractions, David remained focused on what he was supposed to do: rescue the people of Keilah, lead his men, and honor Saul as God's anointed.

3. David said to Abiathar that the priest - David, continuously sought the Lord in the midst of danger. God was ahead of David because He allowed David to meet with the priest prior to Saul and then spared Abiathar so that David could gain the spiritual help he needed.

a) David repeatedly consulted with God while Saul never sought God's guidance (Saul is so far removed from God he actually thinks God has given David into his hands; vs. 7) and would eventually go to the witch of Endor.

4. Bring the ephod here – By reaching out for what represented the oracles of God's divine will, David, unlike Saul, sought after God's will.

a) Abiathar's ability to make oracular inquiries for David stands in stark contrast to Saul's lack of divine guidance.^[11]

b) *Linen ephod* – A priestly garment worn by those who served before the Lord at his sanctuary (22:18; 2 Sa 6:14). It was a close-fitting, sleeveless pullover, usually of hip length and is to be distinguished from the special ephod worn by the high priest (1 Sam. 2:28; Ex. 39:1-26).

c) David's first instinct was not survival; it was prayer. His men's first instinct was to respond in fear.

5. Oh Lord God of Israel –Despite seeking God to help the people of Keilah and being trapped in obeying God, David still views the Lord God the same way. His overwhelming circumstances did not change his perspective of God. He is still the one who has all power and authority and is sovereignly superior over all.

6. Your servant has heard for certain - David viewed himself humbly serving under the Lord God's authority. He was willing to wait for directions from God even though he had a full intellectual understanding of what Saul planned to do.

7. Seeking to come - David remains before God when he knows that Saul is putting together a strategic plan that offers him success against whoever opposes him from capturing David.
8. Destroy the city on my account—Saul plans to trap David and erase the city if that is what it takes to get David.
9. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? - The very people David helped (the Philistines were ravaging them), in the midst of fear, were going to imprison David so that he could not escape and turn him over to Saul. Their goal was to put David in the power and control of Saul to save their skin. Like in the case of Job, satan can use anyone he has the power to influence to turn against you.
10. Just as Your servant heard - David went from sensing Saul was coming to kill him to intellectually understanding that Saul was completely set to implement his plan at all costs.
11. Just as Your servant heard, David remained completely humble before God, demonstrating his complete dependence on God. Despite all the battle successes David achieved, none of them made him act independent from God.
12. O Lord God of Israel - David reverence God in the midst of overwhelming circumstances by calling the Lord by His personal name and recognizing His faithfulness in maintaining His covenant with David while humbling himself before Him as his slave.
13. O Lord God of Israel - No matter how powerful our life circumstances may seem, the Lord does not forsake His covenant. He is always in control and sovereignly protects those who humbly trust Him.
14. I pray tell your servant – David intensely, urgently but respectfully asks the Lord God for direction and to expose the circumstances around him.
15. The Lord said, “He will come down” – The Lord who has all power and authority, who can destroy Saul’s plans and have Saul die, says that He will allow Saul to make it down to Keilah safely and that the people that David saved would turn him in.
16. The Lord said, “they will surrender you” – God spoke to David, as he continually sought the Lord through the priest, that the people were going to shut the gates, trap David inside the gates, and imprison him so Saul could capture and kill him.

17. The Lord said, “they will surrender you” – Knowing God’s will before we act is our salvation. Remaining humbly praying to God and remaining in His will is our deliverance from all our troubles (Psalm 34).

D. In Control (v. 14):

1. David stayed - David continuously obeyed God (His heart was never to turn away from the will of God; Psalm 119) and then waited on God for his victory over evil (Isaiah 40:27-31).

a. While in flight from Saul, David did more than remain in hiding. He also fought on behalf of his beleaguered people against the ever-menacing Philistines. First, having consulted the LORD by means of the ephod’s sacred lots (v. 2; cf. v. 6), he delivered the town of Keilah, near the Philistine border, 15 miles southwest of Bethlehem (vv. 1–5). But the people “repaid” his kindness by betraying him to Saul (vv. 7–12).^[12]

b. What patience David had, to be able to endure daily danger and persecution! He was a master strategist and could have tricked Saul into defeat, but he preferred to wait for God to give the victory. How moving it was when Jonathan met him in the wilderness (at the risk of his own life) to reassure him and encourage him. Sad to say, Jonathan was never allowed to reign with David, for he was slain in battle with his father. The righteous often suffer because of the sins of others.^[13]

2. Saul sought David every day - God hid David from Saul, but that did not deter Saul. Instead of focusing on running a nation, he focused on finding where David was hiding and killing. *“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”* (1 Peter 5:8-10; NASU)

a) Though Saul sought David continually (v 14; cf. his seeking him or his life in vv 15 and 25), Yahweh (see 14.a.) did not give David into Saul’s hands despite the king’s

expectations (v 7). Yahweh’s military support for David in this chapter was both offensive (v 4) and defensive (v 14). David himself was afraid now, and not just his men (v 3) since he perceived that Saul’s search was for his very life (v 15). David’s abode in the wilderness is further specified as Horesh (vv 15, 16, and 18). This may mean “wood” or “wooded height” (BDB, 361b) although many associate it with Khirbet Khoreisa (MR162095) some two miles S of Ziph.^[14]

3. Given you—No matter how thorough Saul’s efforts were, God was utterly committed to caring for David and generously preserving his life.

4. Given you – We can now understand why David would say, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.....” (Psalm 23). Because God preserved David while in the wilderness, David would be glad to bring His ark into the city so that ‘he will dwell in the temple forever’

[1] Robinson, G. (1993). [*Let us be like the nations: a commentary on the books of 1 and 2 Samuel*](#) (pp. 123–124). Eerdmans; Handsel Press.

[2] Klein, R. W. (1983). [*1 Samuel*](#) (Vol. 10, pp. 229–230). Word, Incorporated.

[3] Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). [*Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*](#) (1 Sa 23). Victor Books.

[4] Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). [*The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament*](#) (electronic ed., 1 Sa 23:9–12). InterVarsity Press.

[5] Robinson, G. (1993). [*Let us be like the nations: a commentary on the books of 1 and 2 Samuel*](#) (p. 124). Eerdmans; Handsel Press.

[6] Klein, R. W. (1983). [*1 Samuel*](#) (Vol. 10, p. 230). Word, Incorporated.

[7] [*Life Application Bible Notes*](#) (p. 448). (2007). Tyndale.

[8] Klein, R. W. (1983). [*1 Samuel*](#) (Vol. 10, pp. 230–231). Word, Incorporated.

^[9] Payne, D. F. (1994). [1 and 2 Samuel](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 316). Inter-Varsity Press.

^[10] Robinson, G. (1993). [Let us be like the nations: a commentary on the books of 1 and 2 Samuel](#) (pp. 124–125). Eerdmans; Handsel Press.

^[11] Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). [The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament](#) (electronic ed., 1 Sa 23:9–12). InterVarsity Press.

^[12] Merrill, E. H. (1985). [1 Samuel](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 451). Victor Books.

^[13] Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). [Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament](#) (1 Sa 23). Victor Books.

^[14] Klein, R. W. (1983). [1 Samuel](#) (Vol. 10, p. 231). Word, Incorporated.