

LESSONS FROM DAVID'S FLIGHT TO THE PHILISTINES

When we read of the great characters of the Bible and read of some of their deeds many of us might feel intimidated by their level of spirituality when we compare theirs with our own. They might seem in a league of their own way ahead of us.

We can read of men like Joseph or Job or Daniel who's long lives of dedicated faithfulness seem nearly devoid of any great mistakes and then perhaps worry about own level of faithfulness to God's ways.

The Bible is very different from other historical or sacred works of the ancient world in its brutal honesty about the nation and the people that God chose to work through. It truly is a warts and all account of lives that we can learn from – both their strengths and their weaknesses.

I mentioned men like Joseph, Job and Daniel who had next to nothing negative written in the Bible about their lives. What has to be remembered is that this is more the exception than the rule of the great men and women of the Bible. Most of the heroes in the Bible also made great mistakes. Interestingly, the man held up as the man after God's own heart in the Bible, King David, was not one of those amazing exceptions. Not only did King David have some wonderful strengths he also made some great mistakes in his lifetime.

When people point out David's big mistakes the two mistakes that they usually point to are the adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband to cover it up and the time that he numbered Israel.

One book that I read that did a wonderful job fleshing out David's life was a book by Charles Swindoll called "David – A Man of Passion and Destiny". While I knew a lot about David's life beforehand, when I read it and looked more closely at his life I was truly struck by the humanity of the man and just how spiritually weak he was at various times in his life.

The author went into the sins I just mentioned along with others such as his polygamy and subsequent weakness as a father with the divisions that occurred in his family, particularly with the coup led by his son Absalom.

There was one other great mistake that King David made that I was not that familiar with that doesn't receive much attention that started as a carnal reaction lacking faith in God's protection and ended up backfiring on him and the people with him terribly in the end. That was his flight into the land of Philistines.

In this speech today I'd like to look at the story of his flight to the Philistines and the lessons that we can draw from it.

The story of David's flight begins in **1 Samuel 27**. The events leading up to his flight are as follows. In **chapter 22** Saul kills the priests at Nob who helped David as he fled from Saul. In **chapters 23 and 24** Saul pursues David. David spares Saul's life when a chance to kill him comes along and Saul humbly acknowledges he was wrong to try and kill David. In **chapter 25** Samuel dies and David almost kills Nabal for his ungratefulness to David protecting his property

but is stopped by Abigail's intercession. In **chapter 26** Saul is stirred up to go after David again and yet again David spares Saul's life when another golden opportunity presents itself.

At the end of **chapter 26** we read:

And Saul said to David, Blessed *are* you, my son David. You shall both do *great things* and also shall still prevail. So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place (**verse 25**).

During both occasions where David spared Saul God's intervention to protect him was clearly evident. He had already been anointed to be the next king and Abigail encouraged him by acknowledging him as the one who would be the next king.

With that in mind, let's look at what he says in the very next verse at the beginning of **1 Samuel 27**.

And David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul. Nothing *is* better for me than that I should speedily escape into the land of the Philistines. And Saul shall despair of me, to seek me any more in any border of Israel, and so I shall escape out of his hand (**verse 1**).

This is what he is thinking now and in the next verses we read how he acts on it:

And David arose and passed over, he and the six hundred men with him to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath. And David lived with Achish of Gath, he and his men, each one with his household; David with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel, and Abigail of Carmel, Nabal's former wife. And Saul was told that David had fled to Gath. And he never again looked for him (**verses 2-4**).

From a human point of view it seems to have worked as far as escaping from Saul's attempts to kill him but when you decide to live with the enemy there are consequences. Charles Swindoll has this to say about these verses:

Notice, **1 Samuel 27:1** begins, "Then David said to himself...." Ohoh. There's his first problem. It's important when we talk to ourselves that we tell ourselves the right thing. David didn't. So the very first cause for his dropping into "the pits" is what I would call his humanistic viewpoint. He looked at his situation and sized it up strictly from the horizontal. You won't find David praying even once in this chapter. In fact, David never looks up until much later. He wrote no psalms, he asked for no help, he simply pushed the panic button...

The second thing that caused David's problem was pessimistic reasoning. See what he says to himself: "Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul" (**27:1**). David should have known better. Notice that he says, "I will perish." He's talking about something in the future.... but the man doesn't know the future. No one does! But pessimistic reasoning continually focuses on the potential downside of the future, and this prompts worry. In the

minds of pessimists, the future is inevitably bleak. So we're not surprised to hear his prediction: "I'll perish."

Samuel had anointed him with oil and assured him he would one day be the king. God spoke to him through Abigail and said that the Lord "shall appoint you ruler over Israel" **(25:30)**. God spoke to him more than once through Jonathan, assuring him, "You'll be the next king." Even Saul, his enemy, had said, "I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand" **(24:20)**. But David ignored all of those promises God had given. He now convinces himself, "I'll perish. I'll never rule over Israel ... never!"...

Then David said to himself, "Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than to escape into the land of the Philistines...." **(1 Samuel 27:1)**

Can you believe that statement? That's nothing other than rationalism. He thought, "Times are hard. God has deserted me. I thought I could be king, but I'll never be king. I'm gonna die if I keep on the front edge of Saul's army. They'll finally catch up with me. I'll have to escape. The best solution is to go to Philistia."

David showed a complete lack of faith in God's promises that he would be king and that God would protect him. He took matters into his own hand and fled to enemy territory as a deserter. Continuing on with Charles Swindoll's comments:

And where did David go? He fled to Gath. Remember Gath? We've been there before with David. Remember the giant? Remember his hometown? He was known as Goliath of Gath. Strangely, that's where David's headed. Can you believe it? Only a few years earlier he slew Goliath in the Valley of Elah. Now he runs to Gath, the very home of that giant, and decides he'll live there with Achish, the king - the archenemy of the Israelites.

Just prior to the first time that he spared Saul's life when he was on the run from Saul he tried to flee to Gath. He banged and scratched on the gate and pretended to be mad but Achish wouldn't let him in. The Bible doesn't say how he convinced him to let him in the second time.

Achish gives him Ziklag, one of the Philistine cities to live in. While living there he does secret raids on another enemy of Israel, the Amalekites, who are not necessarily an enemy of the Philistines and he does his best to hide the fact from the Philistines and even resorts to lying about it. These raids open up the possibility of Amalekite retaliation.

Charles Swindoll makes these comments about how David begins to reap the whirlwind for his decision to live with the Philistines:

Achish begins getting flak from the people of Philistia. They want to know why David and his men and all their households are in their midst. "Why in the world are all those Israelites living down in Ziklag?" These people were their sworn enemies. David was, in fact, the man who had killed their mighty champion, Goliath.

Achish defends David. "Hey, everything's okay. David's our guy now." But the people said, "No, we don't want him down there. We don't trust him. And so Achish has to confront David with the fact that they can no longer tolerate having him around..."

Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire...And when David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep. **1 Samuel 30:2-4**

Put yourself in David's stirrups. He comes up over the hill on horseback, and there before him in the distance is the city where he and his men have lived for the past year and a half... and the entire place is burned to the ground. Worse than the physical destruction, though, was the personal cost. All of their wives and children had been taken away as captives by the enemy-the Amalekites, the same people David had raided earlier...

David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and daughters. **1 Samuel 30:6...**

The very people who had looked to David as a guide and a friend and a leader now turned away, embittered at the results. The guys he had trained in the cave, his crack troops from the wilderness of Paran, these guys are now grumbling, "We don't trust David anymore." Mutiny now boarded the bus of carnality.

So what lessons can we learn from this story?

First and foremost, when we have troublesome times of trial or temptation don't lean on your own understanding and take matters into your own hands but have faith in God's promises and seek God's will. As **Proverbs 14:12** says "There is a way that seems right to a man but the end is the way of death."

Secondly, we need to remember that more often than not other people will be affected by our sins and bad judgment calls. Charles Swindoll comments on this point this way:

When David left his wilderness home in Israel and retreated into Philistine country, he didn't go alone. He's the commander-in-chief of the guerrilla troops, remember. The men he's trained in the cave of Adullam are bonded to him. They have lived together and have done battle together in the wilderness as well as among the border tribes. David surely knew they would follow him.

But it is not only his fighting men who go with them. They also bring their households ... and David's two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail, go along as well. So now we have David and his family plus six hundred more households.

You think you can compromise and it won't affect your family? You do not live independently of everyone else. When you make a decision that is wrong, when you choose a course that is not God's plan, it affects those who trust you and depend on you, those who look up to you and believe in you. Though innocent, they become contaminated by your sinful choices.

1 Samuel 27:7 says that David lived in the country of the Philistines for a year and four months. He had compromised for 16 months with this fateful choice of his. What was interesting to me was at the time I read this a dear friend of mine had just come out of a disastrous marriage that lasted about the same length of time. It was something rushed into and her children, including

the additional one from the relationship, also had to wear the consequence of an unfortunate choice. I reminded her of this story and told her that even the best of us like King David have had a similar brain melt to use the vernacular.

The third lesson following on from that is that great men make great mistakes. In a documentary that I saw on Lord Nelson who defeated the French at Trafalgar, one of the commentators made a comment that great men make great mistakes. Having been someone who has made some whoppers in my time I found that comment encouraging from the point of view that even if you make great mistakes you can still go on to do great things for God. Regardless of how spectacularly you may have failed today you always have a fresh start from tomorrow on to become a great success if you learn from your mistakes. In fact, those mistakes may help you to be an even better success than if they didn't occur in the first place.

The final point following on from that last comment is that God can turn lemons into lemonade. We can be a better success if we turn to God and learn what we can from the mistakes that we make. David turned back to God after the disaster in Philistia and started enquiring of the Lord again like he used to with decisions he had to make, which he should have taken advantage of after he spared Saul the second time.

Another apparent blessing that God provided through the trial was the big technology of the time – the use and fashioning of iron. Prior to David going to Philistia the Philistines had a monopoly on the production of iron and deprived this to the Israelites yet we read at the end of David's life that he had provided iron beyond measure for the Temple. It appears that he may have acquired this critical technology during his time in Philistia.

In summary, David's life, both his strengths and weaknesses, provide us many lessons to learn from. We can be encouraged by the fact that though we might make some great mistakes if we learn from them we can still be a man or woman after God's own heart.