

**1 Samuel 24:1-22**

**SI:** On a historical level, the book of 1 Samuel is about the establishment of Israel’s monarchy, and about how David became God’s chosen king. On a spiritual level, 1 Samuel is about what it means to live by faith.

**INTRO:** Back in 1999 you may remember the tragic plane crash that took the lives of John F. Kennedy, jr, his wife and her sister.

He was piloting a private plane to Martha’s Vineyard.

It got dark and hazy and he flew the plane right into the water.

I don’t know anything about flying, but I remember wondering at the time how that would be possible. Wouldn’t it feel like you were going down.

And if you felt that sensation of going down, you would just pull it back up.

I voiced that opinion to an experienced pilot and he laughed and said—

It doesn’t work that way.

There are sometimes conditions flying when your sense of direction, your sense of up and down, your sense of speed—they can be telling you one thing, just screaming at you, but they are completely wrong.

He said your senses could tell you that you are right side up when in fact the plane is upside down.

He said that’s why planes have instruments—

That’s why they have altimeters and attitude indicators and airspeed indicators.

You learn to read those instruments and trust them and fly by them.

Even when your instincts are telling you something else.

And it turned out that was the cause of the Kennedy crash.

He didn’t have an instrument certification. He was only certified to fly visually.

On a lighter note, one time I was driving to Greenville, SC with my father-in-law.

John DuBose had a new GPS. He always loved gadgets.

He was sitting in the passenger seat fiddling with it, got it all set up.

We were just east of Birmingham where I-59 and I-20 split and the GPS started telling us to take I-59 north, which was obviously wrong. I took I-20 to Atlanta.

Then the GPS started telling us at every exit to get off, turn around, go back to 59.

John was poking at all the buttons and couldn’t get the thing to shut up.

Exit after exit kept reprimanding us. So finally he shoved in glove compartment.

I’m sure all of us could tell stories about conflicting forms of guidance—

when something tells us to go one way, something else says to go another way.

That’s what this story in 1 Samuel is about—two conflicting forms of guidance.

On the one hand is guidance based on providential events and circumstances.  
On the other hand is guidance based on the law of God and your conscience.  
Which one should you follow?

Well, it's not uncommon for Christians to say—

look what has happened in my life, look at the opportunity God has given me,  
look at the door he has opened—that must mean, that has to mean,  
God's telling me something.

This is the direction God wants me to take. This is what he wants me to do.

Maybe. But maybe not!

The Bible often warns us that reading providential events  
is too ambiguous a basis for guidance.

In this story there are people who are reading events and saying:  
It's clear, this is God's will. This is what God wants you to do.

But you have someone else in the story saying:

No. I'm going to base my decisions on what God has said  
and what my sanctified conscience tells me to do.

So let's look at this passage under two headings.

1. The problems with guidance based on providence
2. A specific example of guidance based on God's law and conscience.

Credit where credit is due: Sermon by Robert Rayburn on this passage.

## **MP#1 The problems with guidance based on providence**

David and his men were on the run from Saul.

They were in an area near the Dead Sea with lots of cliffs and caves.

Some of these caves had been turned into sheep pens.

David and his men were hiding in a cave when into that very cave comes Saul.

Our Bible translation says he went in to relieve himself.

It's a Hebrew expression that says literally "to cover his feet."

Some commentators argue this expression means taking a nap—

others argue it means going to the bathroom, feet a euphemism for other things!

Anyway, I figured all the middle school boys here today would like that detail.

So David's men start whispering to him:

David, God has given you this incredible opportunity.

This is a God thing. This is what God has promised you.

Clearly God is handing Saul over to you.

We all know that you are the man God has chosen.

And it's not difficult to follow their logic.

David had been anointed at the Lord's direct command by the prophet Samuel.

He was God's chosen king for the people of Israel.

Also, Saul had become a terrible king.

He had gone mad with hatred, envy and fear.

He had attempted to murder David and even his own son, Jonathan.

He had exterminated an entire town of Israelite priests, wives and children.

What are the odds, what are the odds that Saul would come all alone into very cave where they were hiding?

That's not chance. That's not luck. That's the Lord. That's God's providence.

They spiritualize it. The Lord has given you this opportunity.

But David, probably after internal struggle, concluded that this amazing providential event was not a sign of God's will that he should kill Saul.

And there were basically two arguments that convinced him not to do it.

The first was an argument from God's word.

David knew that according to God's word he had no right to take the law into his own hands. He had no right to execute the man God had appointed king.

God's law trumped this very unusual providence that put Saul at David's mercy.

Did you notice that David makes that point twice, verse 6 and verse 10?

He says that it's wrong to lift one's hand against God's anointed.

Whenever something is repeated twice, it's for emphasis.

And the obvious implication is that if you know God's word says something is right or wrong, then no providence, no circumstance, no opportunity, no open door, no matter how amazing or striking or unusual trumps God's word.

If Scripture says something is wrong, then don't try to spiritualize situations to justify breaking God's law. Don't say: This is a God-given opportunity. God must be giving me permission. God is in control. Providential events are his doing. But your interpretation is completely wrong.

For example, God's word says that believers are to marry in the Lord. If you just happen to meet this amazing unbeliever who romantically sweeps you off your feet, don't you dare spiritualize that. Don't say: God led this person to me. It's ok for me to marry him or her. How else can I explain our amazing chemistry? It's a God thing. God has spoken. His word is clear. End of discussion.

I said there were two arguments that convinced David not to kill Saul. First was God's word, the second was David's conscience. David was troubled at the thought of doing harm to Saul. He was conscience-stricken for cutting off a corner of Saul's robe. (We'll talk more about what that action meant, why bothered David.) But let's just focus on the fact that David's conscience bothered him and he listened to his conscience rather than being carried along by opportunity.

I saw an TV ad recently where a woman is driving her car and a warning light comes on her dash, so she puts a sticker over it. Smiley face or something. You can do that to your conscience. It's an internal warning light. It's a voice. As Christians, our consciences are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. So when some opportunity presents itself and your conscience nags you, warns you, you can put a sticker over it. Ignore it, silence it, subdue it. Act against your conscience. Eventually that cauterizes it. Weaker. But here's my point—the oil pressure in the engine will not go back to normal. You're going to be headed toward deep trouble your life.

God's word and your conscience are always more certain guides than reading providential events. Providence is too ambiguous, unclear a guide to will of God. Here's a Christian couple and they are amazed to find that the house of their dreams has just come up for sale. And perhaps news of its availability dropped in their

laps in a surprising way. They find out going on market before anyone else. They are sure this means the Lord intends for them to have this house.

Why else would God give them this amazing opportunity.

But the fact is, as anyone can see, the house is too expensive for them. And it becomes an albatross that steals their joy and their charitable giving.

I've known a few pastors who were in good churches but they got a surprising letter from a pulpit committee from another church, it dropped out of the blue. And maybe it was a more prestigious church and that was flattering to them, or maybe it came at a time when they were discouraged or restless—but they didn't really explore their motives, they just saw the appearance of this opportunity as an indication of God's will.

They spiritualized it.

The Lord must be telling me something. Must be wanting me to make a change.

This is what God wants me to do. This is the Lord's will.

So they left good churches and good callings and ended up being miserable.

Reading providential events for guidance is iffy.

All too often we interpret things according to our wishes and desires claim it's God.

That's exactly what David's men did.

I don't doubt for a minute that many of them were completely sincere.

They really and truly believed that God himself was providing David with the opportunity to get Saul out of the way and take the throne.

They thought they were reading the signs rightly. But they weren't.

And you need to be aware that when providential opportunities drop into your lap, they may very well be tests—test of your faith, your contentment, patience, your willingness to listen to the wisdom of other believers, your loyalty to God, to his worship, to your church.

## **MP#2 A specific example of guidance based on God's law and conscience**

David's conscience and David's attention to God's word led him forsake revenge.

It wasn't easy. David was very tempted to take revenge.

Let's look at detail about him cutting off a piece of Saul's robe.

That doesn't seem to be very serious, but David's response, the way his conscience struck him after he did it is a clue more was going on.

Bible scholars say that in the Ancient Near East, this was a highly symbolic act.

The king's robe was the symbol of his reign.

To cut it was an act of rebellion. It was a denial of his right to be king.

Think how passionate people are in America right now about the national anthem at sporting events and whether it is right or wrong for people to kneel in protest. Symbolic acts can be tremendously powerful.

David did this to get some revenge on Saul without killing him.

This would be something to bring back to his men as a trophy.

A way to ridicule Saul and fire them up.

But his conscience got the better of him and led him to take a risk.

Admitting what he had done to Saul and swearing not to harm him.

And at the same time telling Saul, God's going to avenge wrongs you've done

What's interesting is that not just this chapter, but the next two,

we see David wrestling with temptations to get revenge but overcoming them.

It's a theme that appears in some of his Psalms.

### Psalm 37

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;

do not fret when men succeed in their ways,

when they carry out their wicked schemes.

Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;

do not fret—it leads only to evil.

For evil men will be cut off,

but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.

### Psalm 8

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise

because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

It's better to trust the Lord than to try to get revenge in your own way—even if it's just with your words or thoughts.

God will exact justice in the right time and place.

Your efforts to do so will fail or make matters worse.

But you can be assured that God will exercise judgment in the world through his children who praise him and pray to him.

Even if God's children are weak and powerless as the world measures things, they are really far more powerful than those who have harmed them.

You see that in living color as David comes out of the cave and Saul ends up weeping with regret. It's short-lived, but it shows way of faith.

Now this might seem like it doesn't apply to you.

But there are so many times in our lives when the opportunity presents itself for us to take revenge on someone.

There is a person who you feel has harmed you or belittled you or ignored you.

Maybe there is a person that you are a touch jealous of, envious of success.

And the opportunity presents itself for you to say something to discredit that person.

To drop a tidbit of information into the conversation that reflects badly.

Maybe to repeat some gossip or not correct some slander making the rounds.

But God's word forbids the spirit and the practice of revenge.

Deuteronomy 32:35 says: It is mine to avenge, I will repay says the Lord.

David certainly knew that passage from the law of Moses.

Paul quotes it in Romans 12.

Things look different from the perspective of faith.

If someone has done you harm and the opportunity is provided to get them back, even if it's just symbolic—God forbids that.

He holds judgment in his hand.

And even though his judgment is not as swift as ours would be—  
it's far more effective and it's pure and clean.

Remember that famous line in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem—

Though the mills of God grind slowly,

Yet they grind exceeding small.

David was right in refusing to take judgment into his own hands.

He was right basing his decision on the word of God and his conscience—  
and not on the circumstances.

He was right trust Lord to put him on throne at the right time and in the right way.

In the end that was the best for him and for everybody else.

And who did David prefigure and foreshadow?

The Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus could have gotten vengeance on his enemies and he would have been justified in doing so. Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. He is Lord. But as the anointed Son of God, he followed his Father's word, Father's plan, and even allowed himself to be crucified.

Nothing in all history has done so much to heal deep human hurts and redirect otherwise resentful and retaliating lives than Christ's suffering.

Peter said it best:

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Where does the motivating power come from to obey these impossible commands?

From same power that saves you: The power of the Gospel.

God's grace to you when you were his enemy.

And Jesus Christ's own painful and shameful death for you.

To the degree that the Gospel and the cross is vivid in your mind and heart—to that degree you will be able to bless your enemy and not curse, do good to him and not evil.

What will you allow to guide your life and decisions?

When you've been wronged and your emotions are raw?

Or when you've gone without the things that are important to you?

And then suddenly, the opportunity presents itself for you to get what you want?

To get a little revenge or whatever that thing is that you want so badly.

Be careful not to interpret that opportunities as God's will.

It could just as well be your sinful desire that you are calling God's will.

Search God's word for direction and wisdom. Listen to your conscience.

And look to Jesus Christ, to his willingness to go to the cross and suffer, as your example and strength.