

1 Samuel 27:1-12

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: When Will was little, whenever he heard a story that involved conflict, he always had to establish who were the good guys and who were the bad guys. No ambiguity—white hats and black hats. He was on side of white hats. One time we were going somewhere, he was in car seat behind me. I was driving. I was telling Allison about something and I raised my voice. And when I did—Bam, Will kicked the back of my seat. I started laughing because I knew what he was thinking. Man yelling at woman. Bad. Black hat. So the white hat in the car seat came riding to the rescue. I tried to explain that I wasn’t yelling at Allison, just telling a story. But Will didn’t look like he was buying it.

Just like there were two interpretations of what happened in the car that day, there are two very different ways to read 1 Samuel 27, and you can find both represented in commentaries.

Some say that David was wisely seeking a safe place for himself and his followers. Not only that, he used the opportunity to play the Philistines for fools. David used the town the Philistines gave him as a base to wipe out these people that were allies of the Philistines and enemies of Israel. He was getting intelligence about the Philistines that in later years he used to defeat them when he became king.

But I don’t think David is wearing a white hat in this story. He was wearing a white hat in the last chapter, when he spared Saul’s life and tried to convince Saul to repent and change. That was truly a brave act of faith and love on David’s part. But not this. This chapter is a description of a lapse of faith, a failure of faith.

It’s fairly typical for the writer of 1 Samuel to describe an event and not give an overt moral judgment. Not to say: The thing displeased the Lord. Instead, the readers are expected to use the rest of Scripture and their sanctified common sense to figure out what moral and spiritual judgments should make. So what’s the evidence that David fails in this chapter and has a lapse of faith?

It's pretty compelling.

Verse one clearly suggests David was not operating from faith when he decided to leave the land of Judah and go live with the Philistines.

David said to himself. Literally, David said in his heart.

What did he say in his heart? Saul's going to destroy me some day.

He was motivated by fear.

Over and over the Lord had delivered him from threats against his life.

But David seemed to forget that.

He had a priest with him who had the ephod, but David didn't consult him.

He followed his own plan. What seemed best to him.

Then there's the matter of David deceiving Achish the Philistine ruler.

Deceiving your enemies in wartime is legitimate. Part of the ethics of war.

But David wasn't at war with Achish. He asked him for sanctuary.

Even though Achish was a pagan, he showed David kindness.

This wasn't the legitimate deception in wartime, this was treachery.

And finally, David wiping out the people in these villages.

Yes, the Lord did at times instruct Israel to wipe out their enemies entirely.

God gave that order when he used Israel as an arm of his final judgment.

But when he gave that order, the Israelites weren't allowed to take spoil.

What does David do here? He kills the people but it's just so they can't tell.

And there's nothing holy about what he is doing, because he takes the spoils.

This was not a holy war.

A commentator says this is "one of the most disreputable episodes in David's career, made worse by the need to lie consistently to Achish about what was going on."

So we have David in chapter 26 walking by faith right into the middle of Saul's camp, trusting God for protection, sparing Saul's life, loving his enemy, being the man of faith and love he's supposed to be.

But we barely have time to admire David before it seems he's forgotten everything he's learned. In chapter 27 he's walking by fear, trusting his own plans, being deceptive, treacherous, disreputable, shameful and getting into trouble.

We might wonder how this could be possible, for someone to flip-flop from faith to unbelief, from trust to fear, from brave obedience to shameful lies—but guess what?

We know it's possible, because we've all done it.

And we've all known other Christians who've done it, Christian friends,

fellow church members, our Christian children.
So what should we do about it?

Let's look at this passage and this topic under two headings.
How we should deal with our own failures of faith,
and then how we deal with this in the lives of other believers.

MP#1 When it comes to dealing with ourselves, with our own failures of faith, we should be tough on ourselves, we should interrogate ourselves and not accept any excuses for not living by faith.

Let's start with some theology. Sanctification. What is sanctification? Our catechism says: Sanctification is the work of God's free grace whereby we are renewed in the whole man, after the image of God, and are enabled more and more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

So, God's grace works in us. Every part of our personhood is renewed. We become more like God. And we get the power, more and more, to quit sinning and to live a good life.

Now that's all true. That's a great definition of sanctification.

But the catechism leaves the impression that sanctification is this gradual, smooth, upward progression toward being like Jesus.

But the fact is there's nothing gradual and smooth about it.

Our growth in holiness progresses by fits and starts.

There are peaks and valleys.

There are lessons learned and promptly forgotten.

There are crises points that drive us to desperate repentance and moments of clarity, and then these are often followed by long periods of spiritual plateau.

It's also sometimes the case that a believer's sanctification ends when he's on a downward slope . . .

So he dies in a weaker spiritual condition than was at some earlier point in his life.

The Bible is not shy giving us example after example in the lives of God's people.

Do you remember this was not the first time David's faith failed?

Back in chapter 21, when he was first running from Saul he got scared and made his way to the land of the Philistines. He almost got killed.

This time it's different and the Philistines give him sanctuary.

But the point I want to make is that David didn't learn his lesson from the last time.

When his faith got weak, he went down the same old path.

Abraham did the same thing. Twice he got scared he would be killed because his wife Sarah was so beautiful he thought other men would want to take her.

So he told her to lie. Say she was his sister.

The first time Abraham was humiliated. But guess what?

He did it again when his faith failed.

There's another pattern of failure we see in David.

Sometimes, when a believer has experienced a spiritual highpoint, a powerfully answered prayer, a season of dramatic growth, a sense of the Lord's presence, or maybe an outpouring of blessings—when that happens—the next step is a failure of faith and spiritual regression.

David acts with faith and bravery sparing Saul's life, trying to reason with him.

I'm sure his men talked and talked about captain sneaking into camp.

But the very next sentence is that he lost faith Lord would keep him alive.

Elijah did the same thing. It's probably the most dramatic loss of faith in Bible.

Elijah stood alone on Mt. Carmel and faced off against 850 false prophets.

The people of Israel were gathered there but they were so confused didn't know who to believe.

Elijah's life was on the line, true worship of God was on the line—and the Lord answered by sending fire from heaven.

The very next day, wicked Queen Jezebel threatened Elijah and it sent him into a tailspin. He ran away from all his responsibilities and talked about killing self.

After a spiritual victory and answered prayer his faith crashed.

David, Abraham, Elijah—these are the heavyweights of the faith.

These are the people we want to meet when we get to heaven.

These are the forerunners of Jesus Christ.

They all had failures of faith.

And of course that should assure you, when you crash or fall to pieces.

But you shouldn't use these examples to be easy on yourself.

David's story is a warning. Abraham and Elijah's are too.

The warning is: Don't let this happen to you.

David didn't say to himself: I've had enough faith in God for a while.

I think for a while I'm going to make my decisions based on fear and do what seems best to me.

He fell into faithlessness without knowing it or recognizing it.

The same thing will happen to you if you aren't alert.

If you aren't interrogating yourself.

Am I walking by faith today? Is this decision an expression of my faith in Christ?

What's my motivation? Is it God's promises, provision, his law or not.

Unbelief is the default position of the human heart—

We'll always go back to that if we don't put faith to work and exercise it.

Allison and I have some friends who just lost their 26 year old son after a terrible 12-year-long illness. The mother of this boy is the one who has mostly

communicated with friends and family over years.
I've told you about them and read some of her comments in past sermons.

You could sometimes tell in her writings that unbelief felt just a breath away.

When one more medical hope was dashed,
when their son was once more in excruciating pain,
when another anniversary of his illness came and went.
How easy, natural, comfortable it would have been, to say in her heart,
God's not going to take care of us. He can't be trusted.
Not to say it out loud. Not even to say it consciously to herself—
but like David, to allow herself to be motivated by despair, anger, or fear.
But what we admired about her was how ruthless she was with herself
in not giving unbelief a foothold, not allowing her faith to lapse.

One time, about 5 years ago they had heard of a new neurosurgeon who
sounded promising. It was very hard to get an appointment.

They finally did. It was an answer to prayer and they were hopeful.
But after meeting with him, they realized he had nothing new to offer.
It was around Christmastime. This is what she wrote:

“Overall, it was a pretty discouraging visit. It's not like there is a hopeful treatment. I just have to continue to remind myself that the Great Physician is not a mere man. It's his birth that we celebrate this time of year, and his life, death, and resurrection. He is our hope for healing and for live everlasting. Please pray that our family has that hope impressed in our hearts this Christmas, as we pray the same for you and your family. We wish you a very Merry Christmas. As always, I'll keep you posted. Still in His strong grip, Leslie

David's story shows every single one of us that we are personally capable of
falling into unbelief.

So let's wake up every morning and remind ourselves that faith in Jesus must
motivate and drive all our decisions.

And let's be tough on ourselves, and interrogate ourselves and not accept any
excuses for not living by faith.

MP#2 But, and here's my second point, when it comes to other believers our Christians friends, fellow church members, our Christian children—when their faith fails, we need to treat them with gentleness as we try to restore them.

As tough as we need to be with ourselves, refusing to forgive ourselves or excuse ourselves when we catch ourselves living without an active faith in Jesus, we need to be just as determined to be gentle with others.

How did the Lord treat David?

He was merciful to him and mitigated the consequences of David's faithlessness. We must do the same.

We must be like the Lord in dealing with fellow believers when faith lapses.

Let's start with some more theology. Catechism asks:

Q. Can true believers, because of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

A. True believers, because of the unchangeable love of God, his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

What's going to happen when believers are overtaken by imperfections, temptations, and sins? Are they going to fall away from grace?

No. Because of all these wonderful things at work—God's love, God's covenant, union with Christ, Jesus praying for them, Holy Spirit in them, new birth.

Parents, when your children have a failure of faith,

it's easy to despair and think it means they must not be born again.

Or when a Christian friend of yours falls into some particularly obvious and crude sin, you might worry about the same.

But there's a world of difference between a stumbling, faltering faith and a person turning away from God and Jesus Christ.

Often in church life we see a person drifting or sliding backwards and we exhort and encourage and sometimes rebuke.

But we do so in the confident hope that this person does belong to God.

We do so with the understanding that we all sin and fall short in many ways and we all go through periods of weakness and even spiritual decline.

Now don't misuse what I'm saying.

Don't use this as an excuse for yourself if you're not living a faithful Christian life.

This doesn't mean God doesn't really care if you take some time off from living a life of sturdy faith in Christ and obedience to his Word.

God was merciful to David. God mitigated the consequences of his faithlessness.

He allowed David to see all he could have lost, people he loved could have hurt. It must have sent a jolt of horror through David when he realized he was expected by Achish to fight against his fellow Israelites.

Then later, as a direct result of David's deception, he and his men almost lost their wives and children.

In both cases God was merciful, got him off the hook.

And after seeing what he could have lost, David turned back to God.

So don't misuse this teaching and think that it means the Lord won't do what he needs to do to get your attention. He does care when faith lapses.

But let's not forget the primary point:

If David's faith failed and God was merciful to him, then we are to be a church body that has an open heart and tender sympathy for the weaknesses of others. We ought to gladly bear the lapses of one another and accept that they happen and not despair.

We shouldn't say: You can't be a Christian.

How can you be a Christian and think that or say that?

No. Love hopes all things and believes all things. The Holy Spirit is at work.

So we ought to do our best to help others recover and hope we'll be helped when we need to recover from our failures.

Back to our friend Leslie.

In one of her emails she described a brief conversation with her son.

I read this to you a few years ago.

His faith often failed. On this particular day he was in terrible pain and he was questioning the goodness of God and the existence of God. About 20 years old.

Leslie writes:

He's asked where God is—and although I can give him the theological answer about the Sovereign plan that God has, watching my kid suffer horribly for 8 years now, there are few words that I can offer him.

She realized she needed to take him to the hospital. Here's what happened.

As I started the car to go to the ER in the middle of this conversation, the song *Blessed Be The Name Of The Lord* came on. A phrase in the song is, "He gives and takes away, he gives and takes away." Jonathan's comment was, "Oh, He takes away alright!!!"

Leslie says:

Watching his unexplained suffering is hard as a parent, it's just pure emotional torture for us.

But now listen to her response to her son.

She didn't say: How dare you question God?

You don't even sound like a Christian.

What kind of a preacher's kid are you?

She also didn't leave his comment just hanging without a response.

Here's her response to his failure of faith.

I did remind him of the next phrase (in the song)—“My heart will choose to say: Lord, blessed be your Name”

Then she adds: —a much needed reminder for me!

How does Paul put it in Galatians?

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.

Look at David in chapters 26 and 27—a high point and a low point of his faith.

Look at your children, look at your Christian friends and church members—
and realize they too will have highs and lows.

So when they fall down, help them up. Brush them off.

Give them a pat on the back and a smile and look them in the eye and say:

I did exactly the same thing not long ago.

Our Savior said there would be days like this.

Thank God for his never-failing mercy.