

1 Samuel 26:1-25

David Betrayed by the Ziphites Again

This story resembles in many points the previous time, when the Ziphites told Saul where David was hiding, and David spares Saul. But the locations and circumstances are so different that scholars are divided about it. Is this just a retelling of the first incident? That doesn't seem to be the case.

If not, what is significant about David sparing Saul twice?

I think it is to show God's long-suffering toward Saul. God gave him several opportunities to repent, but he never did.

What caused Saul to continue to hunt down David even after previously saying "Thou art more righteous than I" and apparently reconciling with him in **1 Samuel 24**?

The Midrash Tehilim explains:

"As soon as Saul departed, the mighty men of Saul said to Saul: 'Do you really think that David refrained from slaying you out of goodness of heart? He knew that you were inside and we were outside and that if he dared harm you we would have entered and dragged him out and torn him limb from limb. As soon as Saul heard that, he was convinced and pursued after him.'"

Who are the "mighty men of Saul?" Modern Jewish commentary says they are none other than a personification of Saul's thoughts and doubts which began to overcome the feelings of remorse and reconciliation (Compare the Midrash of Abraham and "the Satan" in the guise of an old man preventing him from going to sacrifice his son).

This second similar incident was recorded as an answer to the "mighty men of Saul" proving David's good intentions.

There are actually three instances in a row of David sparing the life of someone acting foolishly - Saul, Nabal and then Saul again.

1 Samuel 26:1-3 - "And the Ziphites came unto Saul to Gibeah, saying, Doth not David hide himself in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon? Then Saul arose, and went down to the wilderness of Ziph, having three thousand chosen men of Israel with him, to seek David in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul pitched in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon, by the way. But David abode in the wilderness, and he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness."

The rabbis contend that because Samuel had died, the Ziphites felt that David was no longer protected by Samuel's merit.

Ahimelech the Hittite was probably a native Canaanite from the Hittite tribe (cf. **Gen.**

15:20; et al.) who had joined David's band of soldiers (cf. Uriah the Hittite, **2 Sam. 11:3**). This shows David's appeal to the dispossessed and outcasts around the region.

Abishai was David's nephew, one of the sons of his sister Zeruah (cf. **1 Chron. 2:15-16**). Joab, who later became David's commander-in-chief, was Abishai's brother.

Saul lay sleeping (**verse 7**) within the "trench" - or rather within the confines of his camp which encircled him.

After sneaking into the camp and coming upon Saul asleep, David forbids Abishai from killing him.

1 Samuel 26:9-10 - "And David said to Abishai, Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the LORD'S anointed, and be guiltless? David said furthermore, As the LORD liveth, the LORD shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall descend into battle, and perish."

The rabbis say David was actually arguing with himself here, because he was tempted to kill Saul since Saul had gone back on his agreement not to pursue him. But David overcame his "evil inclination."

Instead, David took Saul's spear and a jug of water.

Saul's spear was not only the symbol of Saul's rule, like his sceptre, but had been used to try to kill David three times. Among the Bedouins a spear stuck in the ground outside the entrance distinguishes the tent of the sheikh.

The spear was Saul's power of death, while the jug of water was the essential power for life in the wilderness. By taking these, David was showing Saul he had the power of life and death over him, but chose not to use them.

No one heard them

1 Samuel 26:12 - "...no man saw it, nor knew it, neither awaked: for they were all asleep; because a deep sleep from the LORD was fallen upon them."

"deep sleep" = *tardēmâ* - deep sleep, a trance. Like God put Abraham to sleep at the horror of great darkness. The same phrase is used when God put Adam to sleep to create Eve (**Genesis 2:21**), and when he caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep at the horror of great darkness when he performed the covenant. (**Genesis 15:12**) The Midrash says it was a state similar to death.

Something equally important was happening here, because Saul was about to seal his own doom by his lack of true repentance, thus opening the door to David's kingdom that foreshadowed the Messiah.

David calls out to Abner, accusing him of failing to protect the king, even though Abner -

according to the Midrash - was so powerful that it was easier to move a six-cubit-wide wall than to dislodge one of his feet.

Saul recognizes David's voice:

1 Samuel 26:17 - "And Saul knew David's voice, and said, Is this thy voice, my son David? And David said, It is my voice, my lord, O king."

David doesn't call him "Father" as he did before, because he is no longer his father-in-law. His wife Michal was given to another, as if David was dead.

1 Samuel 26:18 - "And he said, Wherefore doth my lord thus pursue after his servant? for what have I done? or what evil is in mine hand?"

Recall Moses' complaint to God at Korah's rebellion: "I have not taken one donkey from them or mistreated a single one of them" (**Numbers 16:15**). Jesus too was persecuted without cause.

1 Samuel 26:19 - "Now therefore, I pray thee, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If the LORD have stirred thee up against me, let him accept an offering: but if they be the children of men, cursed be they before the LORD; for they have driven me out this day from abiding in the inheritance of the LORD, saying, Go, serve other gods."

By forcing him to flee into exile, it was tantamount to making him serve other gods, since God would be served only in the Promised Land he had given to His people.

David insists he is about as dangerous to Saul as a flea or a partridge.

Saul's 'Sorrow of the World'

1 Samuel 26:21 - "Then said Saul, I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly."

But as before this was merely the "sorrow of the world." Like the tears of Esau:

- **2 Corinthians 7:10** - "For godly sorrow worketh repentance (*metanoia*) to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death."

"Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself..." (**Matthew 27:3**) "repent" here is "*metamelomai*" which means something more like "regret." True godly repentance is "*metanoia*"

Cain said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (**Genesis 4:13**) which is more like self-pity than repentance.

Esau, "...when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no

place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (**Hebrews 12:16-17**).

Saul repeatedly waffles and returns to his old spitefulness after his brief periods of regret.

David returned Saul's spear to him (**v. 22**), the symbol of the right to rule. Perhaps David did not return the jug of water in order to remind Saul that he still had the power to end Saul's life.

David had exposed his location to Saul, and risked his own life and his men's survival, really as an act of faith to prove his good will toward Saul. Saul could have attacked with his superior force.

1 Samuel 26:25 - "Then Saul said to David, Blessed be thou, my son David: thou shalt both do great things, and also shalt still prevail. So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place."

These are the last recorded words of Saul to David. David left "the territory of Israel" (**27:1**) and moved to the territory of the Philistines, only to return to Israelite territory after Saul's death.

The bottom line of this chapter is **Romans 12:17-21** - "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

- **Proverbs 20:22** - "Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee."

If we could carry this idea over into our social media posts or our personal interactions with others, we could introduce some semblance of civility and mercy in our society. Whenever we're in a position to really stick it to our opponents or enemies, we should remember this story of David. Nothing wrong with winning an argument, but we don't have to twist the knife. We are not the judge, jury or executioner - He is. Our job is to love our enemies, as Jesus said.

Saul's recalcitrance was established by these several opportunities God gave him to repent.

The biblical principle is

- **Deuteronomy 19:15** - "A lone witness is not sufficient to establish any wrongdoing or sin against a man, regardless of what offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

- **Matthew 18:16** - "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

- **2 Corinthians 13:1** - "...In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established."

These two examples of David sparing Saul, and Saul's subsequent regret, which was short of repentance, sealed his fate.