

A Person After God's Own Heart

"...Your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command."

"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 13:14; 16:7

Saul was everything the people wanted in a king. He was "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others" (1 Sam 9:2). But right from the start the narrative gives the impression that Saul's stature was far more in appearance than in character. Three episodes introduce Saul. The first two raise doubts as to Saul's qualifications and to the Lord's purposes in appointing him. The third episode shows what might have been if Israel had been content with a judge instead of a king. We first find Saul on a mission to recover his father's lost donkeys. He was about to give up, when his servant suggested that they inquire of the man of God. The servant not only knew about Samuel and his reputation for authenticity ("everything he says comes true"), but he also supplied the offering which Saul thought they should give but didn't have. Saul brought nothing to the solution of the missing donkeys. Clearly the master was being led by the servant.

When Saul met Samuel at the city gate, Saul didn't recognize the prophet, adding to our impression that Saul wasn't very perceptive. Almost in spite of himself, Saul was secretly anointed by Samuel on the outskirts of town and given several detailed signs of confirmation. Saul and his servant would meet two men who would tell them that the lost donkeys were found. Then they would meet three men who would give them two loaves of bread and lastly they would encounter a procession of prophets and the Spirit of the Lord would come upon Saul and he would be changed into a different person. We read that "as Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day" (1 Sam 10:9). Clearly the measure of man was found exclusively in what the Lord did to him, "and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power" (1 Sam 10:10).

In the second episode, Saul's reluctance to assume his royal title was evident in two ways, in his failure to disclose Samuel's prophecy to his family, and in his unusual behavior when the public announcement was made. The Lord told Samuel that Saul had "hidden himself among the baggage" (1 Sam 10:22), which was an odd place to find Israel's new king. Nevertheless, Saul is presented as the man of the hour, "Do you see the man the Lord has chosen?" asked Samuel. "There is no one like him among all the people." And the people shouted, "Long live the king!" (1 Sam 10:24).

The third episode reaffirmed Saul as king. It is the highpoint of Saul's rule. The Israelites of Jabesh Gilead were besieged by the Ammonites. It was this same city that had nearly been annihilated by the Israelites for their failure to "assemble before the Lord" (Judges 21:5). Everyone in Jabesh Gilead had been put to the sword, except for four hundred virgins who were spared in order to provide wives for the surviving Benjamites (Judges 21). Once again this city was on the brink of destruction, but Saul, a Benjamite, was filled with the Spirit of God and righteous indignation. He cut up his oxen and sent the pieces by messenger throughout all Israel, saying, "This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel" (1 Sam 11:7). The terror of the Lord fell on the people and they rallied to the defense of Jabesh Gilead. It may have been Saul's finest hour. He was magnanimous in victory, forgiving the Israelites who had challenged his authority, and humble in his recognition that God had given the victory.

The scene is reminiscent of the judges. Ironically, this is the same kind of victory that the Lord gave the Israelites under the judges and would have continued to give if they had only trusted in him. The battle belonged to the Lord, and Saul was empowered by the Spirit of the Lord. Saul would have made a better judge than a king, which was exactly what the Lord had been telling the people through his prophet Samuel. But from then on it was all downhill. As Saul became more like a king than a judge, acting like a sovereign (1 Sam 13:9), wielding royal power, setting up monuments to himself (1 Sam 15:12), and fighting his own battles (1 Sam 14:24), he also became increasingly ineffective. Finally Samuel announced, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (1 Sam 15:28-29).

The contrast between Saul and David is at the center of the story even before

David appears on the scene. No sooner had Saul been installed as king, than Samuel announced that, "...Your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him a leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command" (1 Sam 13:14). Saul didn't know his own heart, but his successor would have a heart for the Lord. Saul appeared self-centered and weak, but his successor would appear God-centered and strong. Saul conformed outwardly to God's law, but his successor would be transformed inwardly by God's will. With Saul, obedience was imposed, but with his successor, obedience would come from within.

The contrast between Saul and David is similar to the contrast between the Pharisees and Jesus. Samuel spoke of a person after the Lord's own heart and Jesus spoke of heart righteousness. "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Saul represents the tragedy of external religious conformity, which resulted in a life that was erratic, compulsive, insecure, and moralistic; David stands for the triumph of a personal, passionate relationship to the Lord God. Saul survives as an example of spiritual deformity; David succeeds as an example of true spiritual reality. Their contrasting significance is not literary fiction, but a fact of life. Although we may be uncomfortable with such an either/or choice between Saul and David, life is such that we must choose a path which either takes after Saul or follows after David. The spiritual descendants of Saul can be found everywhere, but Yahweh seeks out a people after his own heart.

We are surprised with God's choice of Saul for Israel's first king, but may be we should be surprised of God's choice of us as his followers. Why did God choose Saul knowing that he would squander an extraordinary opportunity? How could anyone despise the call of God as Saul did and wilfully choose to drop out of the story? Although the issue is most perplexing it is certainly not unique to Saul, for it is repeated in lives of countless men and women who appear to despise the grace offered to them in Christ. Saul turned every advantage into a disadvantage, every opportunity for obedience, into disobedience, and every blessing into a burden. The author of Hebrews contemplated just such a reversal in the lives of Christ's followers: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying

the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (Heb 6:4-6).

As tragic as Saul’s situation was, the Lord told Samuel to get over it and move on. “Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king” (1 Sam 16:1).

Chosen, Gifted, and Empowered

David remains unnamed until he was anointed. The storyteller purposely withheld his name until we are told the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. We are intentionally not introduced to David until he is identified, set apart, and empowered by the Lord. The delay in naming draws attention to what defines David. He is who he is by virtue of the Lord's direction. Apart from the Lord, David would have remained nameless and unknown, his life undefined, and his role unremarkable. David's significance lies not in what he made of himself, but in what God made of him. This is true in our lives as well. The significance of our lives is not found in what is achieved but in what is received. Fulfillment comes not through striving but obeying. Life is a gift, not a competition. It is not a matter of grit, but grace. We were meant to see ourselves in David and learn from God's involvement in his life. David is not a metaphor, much less an icon, but a powerful example leading us in the way of salvation, showing us what it means to be a person after God’s own heart.

Like Saul, David is introduced in three episodes, but unlike Saul, each episode presents David as a man after God’s own heart. In Saul, God gave the people what they wanted, but in David he gave them what they needed. The difference between Saul and David was the difference between appearance and authenticity. Saul was head and shoulders above everyone else, but David had a heart for the Lord. Each was unique, but their uniqueness could not have been more different. The contrast between Saul’s image and David’s character was meant to impress us, as it impressed Samuel. “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). The myth of the self-made man or woman had no place in the David story. We have already been down that road with King Saul. There was no “career path” for David to follow and no fantasizing about being “in the right place at the right time.” In all three introductory episodes, the secret anointing, the invitation to play his instrument for Saul and the show-down with Goliath, two things are made clear: David has a special relationship to the Lord and God sovereignly places him precisely where he’s needed, but not necessarily wanted. He’s both a man after

God's own heart and the odd man out. The only possible explanation for his life was the sovereign will of God.

Of all the sons of Jesse to be chosen as Israel's next king, David was the most unlikely. Samuel had to ask Jesse after reviewing his seven sons, "Are these all the sons you have?" And even then, Jesse seemed reluctant to send for his youngest. "There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep." One can sense Samuel's frustration, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." Somebody had to stay with the sheep and who better than the runt of the family. Who knows how David felt when his seven older brothers gathered before Samuel to worship the Lord God? The message that comes through is this: "In my insignificant, sheep-keeping obscurity, I am chosen" (E.Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, p.17). For the followers of Christ, the primary fact is not that we have been excluded but that we have been chosen. We are encouraged to dwell on redemption not regrets. The man after God's own heart could still sing the twenty-third Psalm, "the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," even though he hadn't been called by his father to attend Samuel's ceremony. The Lord knew his heart and persisted in the call. When David arrived (finally!), the Lord said to Samuel, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one" (1 Sam 16:12). Keep in mind that this anointing was God's hidden work. Samuel's secret, subversive act, born out of devotion, not defiance, was kept from public view. David's anointing in the presence of his brothers out of necessity became a family secret. If word of this was leaked to Saul, Jesse's whole family was in danger. I am sure that the brothers were of mixed emotions about this whole episode, but they would never forget that day. They would remember Samuel's anointing oil running down David's head and beardless face. Years later, when David was made king they must have remembered the day that Samuel, the old prophet, came to town and anointed their youngest brother. God's hidden work had begun in Israel and it had begun in earnest in the life of David, a teenager chosen by God. No one but God knew all that this defining moment would mean for David, for Israel, and for salvation history. We are told that from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. The empowering presence of God shaped David's life and made David, "a man after God's own heart."

The second surprising episode in David's life was his assignment to play his musical instrument for Saul to help alleviate the king's depression. "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (1 Sam 16:14). The fact that the Bible attributes Saul's mental

illness and depression to divine authorization should not shock us, nor lead us to conclude that this was done because ancient people were ignorant of mental illness. Saul's disobedience led to a psychotic breakdown and this form of judgment was authorized by the Lord. God was wisely perceived as sovereign over all including Saul's violent mood swings and David's placement at the center of political power.

Of all the people in Israel, it is extraordinary that David should be summoned for this sensitive task. His reputation preceded him: "...He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him" (1 Sam 16:18). Initially, David's music had the power to calm Saul whenever "the spirit from God came upon" him, but eventually even the sight of David drove Saul wild (1 Sam 18:10-11). Ironically, the most powerful man in the land did not have the power to control his own emotions. But even more surprising was the fact that the shepherd boy who had been secretly anointed to succeed the king was called upon to comfort the king.

The third introduction to David places him at the battle made famous by the Philistine giant named Goliath. Once again David found himself in a place where he wasn't wanted but where he was desperately needed! By now we may wonder why the narrator introduces us to David, as if for the first time, and why Saul needed to be reintroduced to David following the shepherd boy's triumph over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. Some scholars conclude from this that David's introduction is comprised of three separate fragments, but an alternative view is that the storyteller keeps re-introducing David to emphasize his anonymity. For the time being, in spite of his gifts and experience, David had a low profile. He was, so to speak, the invisible man, an outsider. His unexpected presence was not only orchestrated by God, but it was subversive. Israel's army was looking to their king to lead, but David was looking to Yahweh for victory, "for the battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam 17:47).

Armed to the teeth and protected like a tank, Goliath was an even bigger talker than he was a man. For forty days, morning and evening, Goliath bellowed his defiance against the servants of Saul. And for forty days Israel's feeling of powerlessness and fearfulness grew. The closest match Israel had to Goliath was King Saul, who stood head and shoulders above everyone in Israel. Day after day, Goliath defied the God of Israel. By the time David arrived, Saul's army was demoralized. They were reduced to cowering behind their lines, dreading defeat at

the hands of the Philistines.

David is introduced first as a delivery boy and then as an object of his oldest brother's scorn. Eliab couldn't bear to overhear David's characteristic confidence: "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Eliab exploded with anger, "Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle" (1 Sam 17:26-28). It is ironic that in this most famous of children's Bible stories the only real man in the story is a boy. Not Goliath, not Saul, not Eliab, but David! Only a person after God's own heart could say what David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him" (17:32). David ignored forty days of intimidation and mind-games and pictured Goliath like one of those wild animals he defeated when he defended his sheep. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of the Philistine" (17:37).

Imagine the consternation among the thousands of Israelite soldiers as they watched the shepherd boy descend into the canyon and kneel by the brook. Israel was once again on the brink of losing their national identity. David chose five smooth stones, but it only took one stone to prove to two armies "that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam 17:47).

David's triumph over Goliath caused Saul to ask his commander, Abner, "Whose son is that young man?" Or, in other words, "What's his story?" Abner replied, "As surely as you live, O king, I don't know." So Saul ordered, "Find out whose son this young man is." Saul's inquiry draws our attention to David's anonymity. The powers that be didn't even know his name or family background. They didn't know his story, just as they didn't know Yahweh's story. The men in charge were out of it, clueless as to what the Lord God was doing. Our introduction to David ends with Saul meeting David as if it were for the first time. "Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asked when David was ushered in by Abner. "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem."

Everything about these two men was different. Saul couldn't find his father's donkeys to save his life, but David risked his life to protect his father's sheep. Saul was a reluctant leader, going so far as to hide himself among the baggage,

when Samuel sought to anoint him as king. Yet David was a willing warrior, placing his life on the line for the sake of Yahweh. The Spirit of the Lord sought to make Saul into something that he didn't want to be. It was a spirituality that was imposed on him and in the end he refused to yield to the Spirit. However with David, the Spirit of the Lord seemed to resonate with his spirit, transforming him into the man God wanted him to be; a man after God's own heart. Left alone, Saul wrestled with his inner demons, but David was at peace with God and himself. The story reveals two very different pictures of these two men. Two were called, but only one was chosen. Two were entitled, but only one was gifted. Two were blessed with the Spirit, but only one responded to the Spirit. Two were challenged, but only one was empowered to become a man after God's own heart.

What we must understand is that God didn't have a grudge against Saul. The Lord took no delight in Saul's refusal to respond to his grace. Saul's rejection is of his own free will.

God's grace never ceases to amaze. He called Abraham out of nowhere. Jacob was chosen over Esau. Joseph was blessed above his brothers. God carried on his redemptive purposes through Rahab and Ruth. The bottom line is that the first will be last and the last will be first. Israel was chosen not because they were a mighty nation, but because they were weak. And the same principle applies to the church. Paul spelled it out for the believers at Corinth: "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things---and the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before him" (1 Cor 1:26-29). James drew attention to this same fact: "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (James 2:5).

The storyteller invites us to identify with David, first in his obscurity, and secondly, and more importantly, in his selection as God's chosen one. David's anointing reminds us of God's choice of Israel: "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut 7:6). This prepares us for God's choice of the Incarnate One, announced publicly at Jesus' baptism: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will

proclaim justice to the nations" (Mt 12:18). And this foreshadows our selection: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col 3:12). As the apostle Peter declared, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pt 2:9).

David was neither priest nor prophet, but an ordinary shepherd boy, called of God to represent him. His story should impress ordinary believers, like us, in what it means to be called and empowered by God. He shows Christ's followers earthy spirituality for everyday obedience. Through David, God teaches us how to live in the real world: Don't dwell on your obscurity, but aim for Christ centered maturity. Don't blame life on external circumstances but depend upon God in every circumstance. You can't do anything about being the "eighth son," but you can do a lot about having a heart for God. You can't control your father but you can pray to your Heavenly Father. You can let the world define you or you can let the Lord redeem you. You can feel like a failure or you can have faith in God for the future.

David in the Wilderness

David was far more impressive on the run than when he sat on the throne. His initial success in Saul's service was nothing short of phenomenal. Overnight, he went from anonymity as a shepherd boy to adulation as an officer in Saul's army. When King Saul and his army returned from battle they were greeted with dancing in the streets, but the song the women sang was anything but music to the king's ears. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam 18:7). Saul's confidence in this young officer quickly turned to contempt. He soon realized that whatever blessing he had received from the Lord had been given to David. Nor could Saul accept his son Jonathan's deep affection for David and his daughter Michal's love for him. David's success both as a man and warrior only served to intensify Saul's fear and hatred of Israel's most promising soldier. The success between obscurity and animosity was short-lived for David. Before he knew it, he was on the run. He spent his twenties in the wilderness, both literally and spiritually, trying to stay one step ahead of King Saul who had vowed to take his life.

What began as a spontaneous act of rage, when Saul hurled a spear at David,

developed into an obsession that drove the king to make repeated attempts on David's life. Saul had at first hoped the Philistines would kill David, especially with the kind of challenges he gave to David (1 Sam 18:25), but when that strategy failed, the king sent assassins, then a raiding party, and then his whole army to hunt David down. Just as David had eluded Saul's spear, he eluded every attempt that Saul made on his life. He was driven into the wilderness as a fugitive and for the next ten years David lived on the run trying to stay one step ahead of Saul's army, while waging a guerilla campaign against the Philistines. At times it must have seemed that life itself had conspired to push David out of God's salvation story.

Given the experience of God's people from Abraham to Moses and from the Israelites to David, Christ's followers can count on time in the wilderness. If there is any place where we are going to find our true selves it is in the wilderness, because it is here where we discover our absolute dependency upon God. God's prescribed path to holiness passes right through the wilderness. This is not the kind of holiness many think of. This is not a sentimental, self-righteous holiness, but a robust, life-on-the-line, God-dependent holiness. This is the kind of holiness that the world hates to see, even though the world knows its good! On the few occasions when Saul caught up with David in the wilderness, Saul had to admit the truth about David, even if he hated to, "You are more righteous than I. You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly...When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the Lord reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands" (1 Samuel 24:17-20; see 26:21,25; 1 Peter 2:12; 3:16).

What was true for David is true for us, we live between God's good beginning and God's good end. We face a challenge, not of our own making or choosing, but of God's will and providence. God's good, pleasing and perfect will is harder to live out than we expected. David's future was assured, but his present was in doubt. Who would have thought that between his anointing and his reigning, David would live for nearly ten years on the run, with his life in mortal danger? For the followers of God life in the middle means life on the edge and no one knew that better than David. God's call is more demanding than we ever thought possible and more dangerous than we ever bargained for. The call of God is like the call of the wild. We enter into a hostile environment filled with tests, temptations and dangers, but it is here in the wilderness that we meet not only the enemy, but God.

There's more pain and sorrow to life than we ever imagined and a far greater need for prayer and trust in God than we ever anticipated. David's experience in the wilderness provides a good example of what it means for us "to continue to work out [our] salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13).

Far from becoming an excuse for David, the wilderness proved to be a catalyst for powerful new growth. David was on the run from Saul, but he "was running to God" and finding in him the refuge and strength he so desperately needed (Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*, p.80). "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness. Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me" (Ps 31:1-2). The wilderness quickened David's spiritual pulse rate and exercised his faith in Yahweh. "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth" (Ps 31:5). Several significant qualities are evident in David's wilderness-forged-character which we would do well to cultivate with the help of the Holy Spirit.

First, David manifested a true respect and sensitivity for the sovereign will of Yahweh. David's refusal to lift his hand against Saul, the Lord's anointed, even though Saul had vowed to kill David, is inexplicable apart from David's reverence for the sovereign will of God. In the Desert of En Gedi, David came so close to Saul as to cut off the corner of Saul's robe. Naturally, David's men saw this as his God-given opportunity to put an end to his archenemy. "This is the very day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish'" (24:4). But even the act of cutting off a corner of Saul's robe deeply troubled David and he rebuked his men. "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord" (24:6). The opportunity was repeated when David and Abishai crept into Saul's camp in the middle of the night. In spite of Abishai's insistence that this was God's will and that he could kill Saul instantly, David objected, "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives, the Lord himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed" (26:9-11). David was unquestionably a man of action and courage, yet he refused to take matters into his own hands. Like the Son of David, who refused to turn stones to bread and to call down legions of angels, David boldly left his destiny to God. As

David proved so dramatically that there is a right way and wrong way to go through the wilderness.

David's reliance on the sovereignty of God is expressed in his wilderness prayers. If we want to get inside David's wilderness experience we have to read his psalms for it is here where we discover David's heart for God. The story behind the story is found in David's worship poetry. His prayers provide insight into a man who placed his utmost confidence in Yahweh. "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies" (Ps 18:1-3). Israel's most wanted man faced the stark realities of his existence in passionate prayer. "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help" (18:4-6). David felt like a drowning man, who was miraculously rescued. "He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me" (18:16-19). From what we know of David's life on the run some of the poetic imagery of his fugitive psalms was more literal than figurative. "With my God I can scale a wall," was not just a way of speaking for David (18:29). The source of David's confidence was no secret. "It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (18:32-34).

Thanks to David the followers of Christ have an example of how to pray when life hangs in the balance and when pain and persecution threaten to overwhelm us. David's experience as a fugitive for the sake of God led him to develop a vivid description of oppression. "I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts—men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords" (57:4). "Strangers are attacking me; ruthless men seek my life—men without regard for God" (54:3). "Fierce men conspire against me for no offense or sin of mine, O Lord" (59:3). David's ability to describe his peril and pain is exceeded only by his ability to express his trust in the Lord. "I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me. He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; God sends his love and his faithfulness" (57:2-3). The depth

of despair, which David knew so well, was never his last word. Invariably praise transcended his fears. “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth” (57:7-11).

David’s reverence for the sovereignty of God was evident in two dramatically different ways, one that we readily appreciate and another that we may have trouble understanding. As we have seen David refused to take matters in his own hands and strike down Saul, the Lord’s anointed. Even at risk to his own life he was determined to wait for God’s timing. But David’s willed passivity when it came to the Lord’s anointed was matched by his fierce determination to wage war against the Philistines, Israel’s enemies. David was on the run from Israel’s army, but he was on the offensive against the Philistines. Each time he received news of a Philistine attack he “inquired of the Lord” and went to war. When it got so bad for David and his six hundred men in Israel, he reasoned, “The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines” (1 Sam 27:1). He fled to Gath and managed to win the confidence of Achish a Philistine ruler, who was convinced that David was an Israelite rebel. Achish gave the village of Ziklag to David and assumed that he was conducting raids into southern Judah, when in fact, he was brutally attacking the common enemies of both Israel and the Philistines (Geshurites, Girzites, Amalekites). David assured the secrecy of his military operations by annihilating everyone in the village in order to eliminate informants (1 Sam 27:9). David’s extermination policy is shocking to us. On the one hand, David respected the life of the Lord’s anointed, but on the other hand he attacked villages and wiped out every man, woman, and child, anyone who might possibly bring word back to his Philistine host of what David was doing. So while king Saul was carrying out his personal vendetta against David, David was carrying out Yahweh’s judgment against the inhabitants of the Promised Land. David had every excuse to lay low, but his insistence on fighting Israel’s battles and fulfilling God’s sovereign will set him apart as Israel’s true leader. Saul’s actions did not prevent David from fulfilling God’s will.

A second quality in David’s wilderness-forged character that we can learn from was his receptivity to wise counsel even when it meant going against his word. The storyteller slows the pace of the narrative down considerably for the story of

Nabal and Abigail so that we feel its drama. The tension in the tale builds as Nabal, a wealthy cattle owner, refused to acknowledge the protection that David and his men had extended to him and his herds. He rejected David's request for provisions with deliberate scorn and condemnation (1 Sam 25:10-11). When the news got back to David his response was immediate, "Put on your swords!"

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants ran to tell Abigail, Nabal's wife. In desperation, he concluded, "Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk with him" (25:17). Abigail is introduced to us as "an intelligent and beautiful woman" (25:3) and her quick response was consistent with this description. She immediately ordered a large quantity of supplies to be prepared and sent to David. She followed, riding her donkey, and met David and four hundred of his armed men as they raced down the ravine heading for revenge. The storyteller informs us that moments before Abigail appeared, David had vowed before his men to destroy Nabal, "May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" The vow called down God's judgment on David if he did not fulfill his word. We have heard the formula for this vow from the lips of Eli (1 Sam 3:17), Saul (1 Sam 14:44) and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:13). David had given his word and pledged himself in the most dramatic way possible, but because of Abigail and her words, David would break his vow!

Before four hundred angry men, Abigail dismounted and "bowed down before David with her face to the ground." She began, "My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say." In the speech that followed, Abigail revealed not only her intelligence but her spirituality. She gave to David the only kind of reasoning that would allow a man of God and a man of his word to break his vow. Besides laying her own life on the line and identifying completely with David's assessment of Nabal's wickedness, Abigail talked to David in terms that a man after God's own heart could understand. She reasoned with him that personal vengeance was contrary to God's will for him. "Now since the Lord has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal" (1 Sam 25:26). She framed Nabal's offensive behavior in the larger context of God's will for David's life. "Please forgive your servant's offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord's

battles. Let no wrong-doing be found in you as long as you live” (1 Sam 25:28). Nabal had scorned David’s identity and condemned David’s motives, but Abigail recognized David as the Lord’s anointed and Saul’s successor. She understood David’s life and death struggle with Saul and she vindicated David’s cause. “Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God.” Given the circumstances, these words must have been amazingly encouraging for David. An unknown woman, intelligent and beautiful, intervened in a crisis situation to affirm the justice of his cause in a way that was both compelling and comforting. It was not so much Nabal who was being protected but David. “When the Lord has done for my master every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the Lord has brought my master success, remember your servant” (1 Sam 25:30-31). David was able to break his vow, because he saw Abigail as a wise counselor sent from God. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands...Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request” (25:32-33,35). The story took a surprising twist when Nabal suffered an apparent stroke and died ten days later (25:37-38). His loss did not cause anyone grief and probably no one, including David, expected such sudden vindication. For his part, David didn’t waste any time inviting Abigail to be his wife.

A third important attribute of David’s wilderness-forged character was his respect for community. David strengthened community by honoring, protecting and providing for those whom the Lord gathered around him. David was not alone in the wilderness for very long. His family heard that he had escaped to the cave of Adullam and they came to him. But their purpose in coming was not to support him, but to receive help. Because of Saul’s hatred for him, David’s family was in danger. They were in need of protection. However, they were not the only ones David attracted. He became a magnet for the disenfranchised. "All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader" (22:2). The nucleus of David's reign took shape in the wilderness, seemingly in the wrong place with the wrong people, but in the very place and with the very people God chose. No one would have planned it this way, especially David. The four hundred men who gathered around David in the wilderness were definitely not “the cream of the crop of Israelite society.” They

were more like “dregs from the barrel. Misfits all, it appears. The people who couldn't make it in regular society. Rejects. Losers. Dropouts” (Peterson, p.94). David's wilderness community recalls to mind the kind of people Jesus attracted when he came out of the wilderness preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God to the diseased, disabled, demonized and distraught. His philosophy of ministry was simple: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

There is no indication that David did anything other than welcome these misfits and undertake to lead them with God's help. The first thing he did was to take care of his father and mother. Why this responsibility fell to the eighth son is a mystery apart from the fact that David had become the central figure in his family. He went to Mizpah in Moab, the place where his great grandmother, Ruth, was from, and said to the king of Moab, "Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?" (22:3). In the midst of the burden of carrying for his extended family, we are reminded that David was dealing with God. It was not the circumstances that determined his future, but the Lord. David's holiness was shaped in the wilderness. It was a down-to-earth, God-centered spirituality.

David's care for his family in the wilderness recalls Jesus' teaching on discipleship. Jesus accused the Pharisees of setting aside the commands of God in favor of their traditions. The command of God was clear, "Honor your father and mother," but the Pharisees avoided their responsibility by claiming their resources were devoted to God. Jesus accused them of nullifying the Word of God through their traditions (Mark 7:9-13). By caring for his parents in the midst of his own extreme crisis, David obeyed the fifth commandment and foreshadowed Jesus' love and concern for his mother as he hung on the cross. Jesus' last act of ministry was to provide for his mother's care.

David's concern to strengthen community was evident in many ways. He inspired loyalty because of his single-minded devotion to God, coupled with his willingness to lay down his own life for his friends. The friendship he forged with Jonathan, in spite of Saul's hostility, offers an indication of the strength of his relational bond. When Abiathar escaped to David after the slaughter of eighty-five priests, including his father, Ahimelech, David pledged to protect Abiathar. In the moment of crisis, David knew how to inspire community and care for people. "Stay with me; don't be afraid; the man who is seeking your life is seeking mine

also. You will be safe with me” (22:23). David had the ability and the sensitivity to defend the integrity of the community. When two hundred men were left behind at Besor, too exhausted to participate in the battle, David defended their right to the plunder. Against those who wished to exclude them from the spoils of victory, David reasoned, “No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the Lord has given us. He has protected us and handed over to us the forces that came against us. Who will listen to what you say? The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike.” The narrator added, “David made this a statute and ordinance for Israel from that day to this” (1 Sam 30:23-26).

David was also an intentional community builder when it came to worship. His own devotion to Yahweh inspired the community to worship the Lord. Even though he was living on the edge, David called others to join him in praise. “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together...Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord” (Ps 34:1-3,11). No matter how desperate the situation, David sought to worship God in community, “I will sing of you among the peoples” (57:9); “I will praise you in the presence of your saints” (52:9).

The fourth quality of David’s wilderness-forged character was his understanding of the relationship between holiness and pragmatism. Life in the wilderness resulted in some very questionable actions for David, such as deceiving Ahimelech the priest. Instead of telling him the truth, David explained that he was on a secret mission for the king (21:2). Another incident was the time he feigned insanity before Achish king of Gath, in order to escape (21:13). The fact that David took refuge among the Philistines implies, for some, David’s lack of trust in God to save him. Not to mention the fact that David pretended to side with the Philistines against Israel (29:1-11). Each of these incidents are presented in the biblical narrative without any indication of approval or disapproval, and no suggestion is offered as to how David might have done differently. We are encouraged to neither copy nor judge David’s actions.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that the wilderness is where we, too, learn to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” It is here we become convinced that it is “God who works in [us] to will and to act according to his good purpose (Phil.2:13). Our assessment of one another's spirituality and faithfulness to God

deserves discernment and humility. We should be careful not to jump to conclusions about someone else's life. David's earthy spirituality does not lend itself to snap judgments and certainly doesn't fit with conventional thinking. In significant ways David's condition reminds us of our own. Like David, under extreme conditions we have felt caught between a rock and a hard place, when humanly speaking there are no good moves to make. No safe options. We are forced to act, and we do so in fear and trembling, wanting to do God's will and desperate for God's blessing, but without the confident knowledge that our decision is God's will. We live by faith and at times we are given more decision-making freedom than we want.

If David had told Ahimelech the truth, that he was fleeing from the king, he would have forced Israel's priest to choose between Saul and himself. It is easy to see how the truth could have been interpreted as a conspiracy against the Lord's anointed. We all end up spending time in Philistine country whether we like it not. Like David we run out of options and God challenges us to take the next step in faith, trusting him to protect us even in Philistine country. I can imagine David thanking God for the ability to give such a convincing performance for Achish, king of Gath that he had David thrown out as a mad man. Tradition holds that the flip side to David's feigned insanity was the powerful praise of Psalm 34. He went from acting like a man, "making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard" (21:13), to praising God. "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them" (34:4-7). If we judge a situation only by its appearance we miss the heart of the matter; David's pragmatism hid the behind-the-scenes activity of the Spirit of God. The wilderness is a dangerous place, but God's good, pleasing and perfect will is sovereign.

It is hard to imagine David's life minus the wilderness, because it was there that the Lord shaped and tested his character and continued to make him into a man after his own heart. David received much more in the wilderness than he achieved. He was always on the run, either hiding out from Saul or fighting Israel's enemies, but through it all he learned firsthand to value the grace of God over the performance of man. The wilderness proved invaluable in strengthening his faith in God. The wilderness was a dangerous place for David and at the same time a wonderful place, because it forged within him a resolute trust in the sovereign will of God. David walked a precarious path, through many dangers, toils and snares, but God's amazing grace kept him on track and in the story. All things do work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

