November 1, 2026

One Small Step

1 Samuel 26:1–25

Our story today is a parallel to 1 Samuel 24. You might be thinking, "Didn't we just learn about David almost-but-not-killing Saul a couple of weeks ago? David is in hiding from Saul again and has an opportunity to kill him again, but chooses not to *again*?" Yes, that's exactly right. In the way of ancient storytelling, these episodes are placed deliberately next to each other in what we call a *chiasm*—a literary structure that looks like a sandwich. The middle of that sandwich is our passage from last week, where Abigail intervenes and rescues David from rashly retaliating against her husband's insulting lack of hospitality.

As a result of Abigail's generosity and honour, it seems that David is renewed in his resolve to wait patiently for God's intervention rather than taking control of the situation for himself. If God can stop David from reacting harshly to Nabal, then God can also help him from reacting harshly to Saul. As Mike said last week, *God intervenes* in the confrontation between David and Nabal—first *indirectly* through Abigail and then *directly* when God strikes down Nabal.

This has been the running theme of our time in 1 Samuel: all the way through, we've been asking, "Where is *God* in this story?" The Bible is *God's story*, not David's or Abigail's or Nabal's or even Saul's. So, as we look at this story where David has another chance to kill Saul, we have to ask, "Where is *God* in this story?"

At first, it seems like God has handed Saul over to David like a Christmas present wrapped neatly with a bow. Saul has come after David with his three thousand men, clearly with an intent to kill him. When night fell, David approached the camp with Abishai, who is his nephew and one of his most loyal men. As they creep into the camp, no one stirs. God has put them into a deep, supernatural sleep.[1] Abishai clearly thinks that God has given them a prime opportunity to kill Saul. He offers to pin Saul to the ground and end their wilderness wanderings once and for all. "God has delivered your enemy into your hands," he says.[2]

What an opportunity! So far, we have seen Saul cause David no end of grief and hardship. David has been on the run for a decade at least; surely, here's his chance to be rid of his oppressor once and for all! When someone or something is causing me never-ending grief, I'm tempted to be rid of it. The more that person or thing pokes at me, nags me, irritates

[1] 1 Sam 26:10
[2] 1 Sam 26:8

me, or triggers me, the more dramatic my fantasies of getting rid of it become—especially when it seems like nothing and no one else is going to get rid of it for me.

So, when an opportunity drops into my lap to get rid of the thing or person that has been relentlessly causing me grief, surely, that is a sign from God. . . Right?

Some of you may be familiar with the concept of "open doors." In churchspeak, this refers to the idea that God "opens doors" to opportunities that he wants us to walk through. It's a discernment tool. We say, *I don't know what to do, but I'll go ahead with it anyway, and if God doesn't want me to do it, then he will close that door.* In some cases, this has been a useful principle in my life.

But here, in David's story, there is a clear open door. Saul is asleep at his feet, he'd oppressed David for years, and David knew that Saul's kingdom was going to be given to him because God had told him so. . . so clearly, the right action is to kill Saul and get rid of him so that David could usher in a new kingdom that followed God's ways. . . Right?

I certainly would not have faulted David if he had killed Saul right then and there. Clearly, David's men thought the same. But again, just as he did in the cave a few chapters ago, David refuses. Instead, he intercedes on Saul's behalf and stops Abishai from killing Saul.

Abigail's generous intervention has left a deep mark on David. He's learned that acting *reactively* leads only to death, whereas acting *with generosity and honour* leads to life. Nabal was a fool, but still Abigail protected his life. Why? Because if David had gone to war against Nabal, it would have bent David's character toward violence and abuse of power. It would have been one large step down a path that leads away from what God calls good. It would have been needless bloodshed on his hands.

Have you ever had a moment in your life when you looked around you and wondered, "How did I get here?" It wasn't one big decision that put you where you are; it was a hundred small ones—for good or bad. A decision to speak a little white lie makes it easier to lie again and easier yet again to fudge the numbers or hide your habits from your boss, spouse, or even yourself. "It's not that bad," you might say. Or maybe you justify it by telling yourself that no one is looking out for you, so you have to look out for yourself.

Or maybe, it started with looking at one picture. And then a video. And then more, until you don't know how you got trapped in a cycle of desire that sees other men and women as objects and leaves you feeling hollow inside. Your initial desire was for intimacy and connection, but now it seems like you have lost both.

Or consider any other sort of addiction, or feeling like a victim, like you are helpless to your circumstances, and you've lost all sense of purpose or goodness in life.

That's what Abigail was saving David from. She saved him from starting down a path that would turn him far away from any semblance of peace or goodness. If he'd killed Nabal out of vengeance and reactivity, how much easier would it have been to kill Saul by the same logic? David could have said, "He's denying me what is mine, so I need to get rid of him."

Instead, his encounter with Abigail has checked that reactive impulse in David. Just because the door is open to him doesn't mean that he should walk through it. David remembers that being faithful to God means honouring others, even if they have dishonoured him, so instead of killing Saul, he only takes Saul's spear and water jug. David remembers that taking a life is not his call; it's *God's*. Saul is still God's anointed king, and David is aware that God will carry out his justice in *God's* own timing. Even though David knows that *he* has been anointed the next king of Israel, he does not rush the process, choosing to trust God's timing.

Let's talk a moment about the anointed king. It's the Hebrew word *meschiah*, which we translate into English as "God's anointed one" or "messiah." Saul is the first *messiah* for the people of Israel, the one who was supposed to lead them as a faithful, God-fearing king. He represents God to the people of Israel. Of course, we know by now, that Saul has repeatedly chosen to make decisions that lead him away from God. But even so, he is still the *anointed one*. He does not lose this title just because he disobeyed God.

This reminds me of the first humans who took the fruit they should not have taken. God had created man and woman to rule and steward his creation—basically, to be his anointed ones who mediated his presence to all of creation. God tells them, "When you eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you will die." They rejected God's calling, just as Saul did. They wanted to seize power for themselves. They eat, but they do not die, not immediately. The judgment has been pronounced, but the timing of the execution is up to God. God meets them in the garden and makes them clothes before casting them out of the garden away from his presence. God's justice removed them from their position of power.

You might say that they spiritually died then, when they were separated from the God who had created all good things, who was only good, and only wanted good for them. They were parted from the tree of life, and so they would die physical deaths—not immediately, but one day. And in the meantime, they had a lifetime of opportunity to turn back to God, to seek his face again, and to learn how to be his people in a broken creation. Though they did

not deserve God's mercy, he gave it to them. His mercy allowed them to live and choose again to follow him.

God had rejected Saul as king back in 1 Samuel 15 and then anointed David as the next king in chapter 16. And now, ten chapters later and years on the run, God still has not taken the kingship from Saul. We might ask why it took God so long to intervene on David's behalf. Why does God wait so long?

The answer is simple, though we often don't like the answer, especially as it pertains to our enemies and those who have hurt us: *mercy*. God shows *mercy* to Saul, just as he showed mercy to the first humans who had rejected him. He patiently waits for Saul to return to him, giving him chance after chance to repent and return to him, even when Saul repeatedly walks away from God.

Life is important to God. We might think that the best justice for our enemies is a slow and painful death. God doesn't think so. In God's eyes, the best justice is *mercy*. Jesus says,

> "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than the others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."[3]

Perfection, *life*, and *goodness* are God's plan for his creation, and have been since the very beginning. One of the main "open doors" in our lives, 1 Samuel and Jesus tell us, is to love our enemies and show mercy to them.

Did Saul deserve David's mercy? I certainly don't feel like he did. But according to the way God sees Saul, he *always deserves mercy*. Why? Because he's God's anointed king, the divine representative of God to his people. God's anointed king was part of God's plan to return his creation back to the garden where he had communion with his people forever.

There are a million temptations tugging at us every day. David was tempted to carry out his own justice against Saul. While initially we might root for him to do so and say, "David, here's your chance! Here's your open door!", if we pause for a moment, we might realize that killing Saul would make David a murderer of God's anointed one. How could David lead a nation whose rulership he seized by his own power? What legitimacy would that give

[3] Matt 5:43–48

him? It would be legitimacy in his eyes only. History has shown us how political coups and assassinations rarely result in the desired peace; it only leads to more war.

Abigail, somehow, saw beyond her husband's foolishness and crassness to see him as a *person* who was created by God and therefore deserved protection, if not honour. She also saw David as more than just a wandering mercenary and entreated him to *live better* than his raw impulses to reactive anger, because he, too, bears God's image.

And now, David can offer the same to Saul. In the previous episode in the cave, David tore off a robe from Saul—which we discussed symbolized taking the crown and kingdom—and then felt remorse about it. Here, he doesn't even skirt the line. Killing Saul is out of the question; Saul is a person created in the divine image and God's chosen king for Israel, no matter how many poor choices he has made. David can extend mercy to Saul because *God* has extended mercy to Saul—and to David, more than once.

Jesus says, "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."[4] Does this mean that God *can't* forgive us if we don't forgive others? That if David had killed Saul, God would not have forgiven him?

No, God's love is deeper and wider and higher than we can imagine. Paul says in Romans,

> I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.[5]

There is *nothing* that can separate you from God's love. If we know that—really truly know it—, it changes our lives completely. Thomas Merton, who lived as a Trappist monk for much of his life, said:

> "We cannot love ourselves unless we love others, and we cannot love others unless we love ourselves. But a selfish love of ourselves makes us incapable of loving others."

And this, I think, is the point that Jesus is trying to make. If we cannot accept forgiveness for ourselves, if we cannot love ourselves as a person who bears God's own divine image stamped on our bodies and souls, *then we cannot truly know what it is to love others*. If you

[4] Matt 6:14
[5] Rom 8:38–39, NLT

cannot know God's love for *you* to the core of you being, then you have not understood love. Letting yourself be loved by others allows you to let yourself be loved by God. And likewise, learning how to truly love others *as they are* as divine image-bearers of God, made in God's image, helps you to learn how accept God's love for you.

It's worth noting that when David takes the spear and water jug from Saul, it brings shame on Saul. Saul knows that David is a better man than he, because if Saul had been granted the same opportunity, he would have killed David without hesitation. Instead, David turned the other cheek and walked the extra mile, and Saul acknowledges where he, like Nabal, has acted like a fool. And just because David spares Saul doesn't mean that he trusts him; the very next chapter will talk about how David leaves Israelite territory because he knows that Saul will continue to come after him. David releases Saul to God's justice in God's own time, and then walks away.

So, who is God in this story? He is love and mercy to *everyone*. *No one* is excluded from his love, even if we think they (or we) don't deserve it. When we know God's love and mercy to the depths of our being, we can offer the same love and mercy to others who we might have considered enemies or fools. We can admit that they are deserving of kindness and love too because God shows *us* kindness and love when we are his enemies and fools. Then, we can release them to God's continuing work in them.

Remember how a hundred small decisions can lead to you a place that looks entirely unfamiliar? The same is true for walking in the direction of God's goodness. Each tiny decision you make to tell the truth, be kind, and show compassion to yourself and others leads you closer to the God who is perfectly Life, Love, and Goodness.

Let's pray.

Communion:

Each month, we gather at the Lord's table to take bread and the cup together as a reminder of what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a way that we, together, confess God's mercy over our lives and accept his love for us. In receiving these elements of the bread and the cup, we take into our bodies the truth of Christ's love for us. He becomes one with us and fills us to overflowing with his goodness. This is the grace of God.

Today, as we pass the bread, I invite you to consider where you are tempted to take action to protect yourself. It is difficult to receive God's mercy and love when we hold onto our anger, frustration, fear, shame, guilt, self-protection, and control. Where do you need to know God's deep, high, wide love to the depths of your being? Bring it to God. Have faith that he hears you, that he longs to be with you in this moment and hears the cries of your heart. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we confess the places where we have strayed far from the path that you have for us. We admit that we have so often tried to live life on our own terms. Lord, forgive us. Have mercy on us. With this bread, we receive your grace. Amen.

This is Christ's body given for you. [Take bread.]

As we pass the cup, I invite you to consider God's invitation to you to come to him honestly, just as you are. We each are his delightful masterpiece—we each bear the image of God. Who needs to experience love and mercy from you, as you have experienced it? Can you trust that God will see that justice is done in his own time? Let's pray.

Creator God, you tell us that you love us. With this cup, we receive your love. May this cup fill us and overflow from us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. [Pass cup]

This is Christ's blood given for you. [Take cup.]