

# 1 SAMUEL

## Part Three: Decline of Saul and Rise of David (Chapters 18-31)

In chapter 17 of 1 Samuel, we reflected on how David defeated Goliath, the symbol of Philistine strength. At the end of the chapter, we saw how Saul still did not know who David was. That was about to change.

### CHAPTERS 18-20: David in Saul's court

When we get to 1 Samuel 18, "David is present in Saul's world in all his attractiveness, ambiguity, danger and power." (Brueggemann)

#### CHAPTER 18: Saul's jealousy

*"Seeing how successful David was, Saul conceived a fear of him."* (v.15)

Commenting on verses 1-4 of this chapter, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: "Father and son are immediately attracted to David as a result of his victory over Goliath. Saul makes him part of his household and Jonathan strips himself of his royal garments and weapons to clothe David with them. The gift is tantamount to abdication of the throne in favor of David. Theirs is an unsparingly generous friendship, lasting their lifetime, while Saul's less disinterested love of David soon grows sour" (p.277).

After defeating Goliath, David becomes a military hero. The women from his hometown and from all the cities come out to sing the praises of David.

*"Saul has slain his thousands  
And David his ten thousands."* (v.7)

Even though the women's chant is intended as praise for Saul as well as David, Saul is not secure enough to join in the celebration. He starts to see David as a huge threat and becomes intensely jealous of him. Verses 10-30 relate various attempts by Saul to get rid of David. None of them are successful, for the Lord is with him in all of his enterprises (v.14). Despite all efforts to get rid of David, "all of Israel and Judah love him" (v.16).

**Pause:** What can cause us to be jealous of others? What can heal us of jealousy?

#### CHAPTER 19: Saul's persecution of David

*"Then an evil spirit came upon Saul."* (v.9)

The next nine chapters of 1 Samuel chronicle Saul's efforts to kill David and David's numerous escapes.

In 19:1-17, Saul's son Jonathan and David's wife Michal, save David from Saul's plot to kill him. We might say the deeper story here is the contest between "the relentless will of God and the diseased will of Saul" (Brueggemann). God's will is that David replaces Saul. Saul's desire is to destroy the one he perceives as his greatest threat. In verses 18-24, we see God's spirit at work in a very tangible way to protect David.

When we read verse 9 which says that an evil spirit from the Lord came upon Saul, we should remember that people in biblical times believed that both good and bad came from the Lord. Today, we would say that Saul opened his heart to the influence of an evil spirit.

#### CHAPTER 20: David and Jonathan's friendship

Two themes that we are now familiar with converge in this chapter: Jonathan's love for David and David's fear of Saul. This chapter is pretty straight forward and does not need much comment. Regarding Jonathan's friendship for David, David Payne writes:

*"Jonathan's utter loyalty towards David was expressed in words and deeds, and provides a model of true friendship. In the first place, he never doubted David for a moment; nothing Saul might say would convince him that David deserved the king's hostility. Then he was prepared to challenge what was said against David, even at the risk of the king's anger – and, as it turns out, at some risk to his own person. Jonathan was to remain fully loyal to his father as well, but where Saul was wrong, Jonathan showed no hesitation. He was also willing to stand up for David's reputation publicly; if Saul's words publicly disgraced David, Jonathan's refusal to stay at the royal table that day was an equally public sign that he dissociated himself from the king's attitude to his friend."* (The Daily Bible Study Series, 1-2 Samuel, p. 108)

**Pause:** What are the characteristics of a great friendship? What do you cherish most about your best friend?

## CHAPTER 21: David the fugitive

*“I have no ordinary bread on hand, only holy bread....”* (v.5)

From here on in our story, David is a fugitive and outlaw. He flees to the shrine of Nog where Ahimelech is the priest. Ahimelech is nervous in the presence of David. If Saul finds out that he welcomed David and fed him, it will be bad news for him. Nevertheless, the priest gives David and his hungry men some holy bread after he ascertains that they have been abstaining from sex. (Sexual relations would have rendered them ritually unclean and thus forbidden to receive the *holy* bread.) Doeg the Edomite, who is Saul’s chief henchman, witnesses the exchange between Ahimelech and David—an important detail for what will happen later.

David is not only in need of food but of a sword, too. Ahimelech gives David the sword with which he has killed Goliath. Then David flees to Gath, a Philistine town. The local king recognizes David as a great soldier. David becomes nervous for his safety and pretends to be insane, a condition that made him untouchable.

## CHAPTER 22: Slaughter of the priests

*“The king’s servants refused to lift a hand to strike the priests of the Lord.”* (v.17)

After David secures a place for his parents with the Moabites, he goes home to the land of Judah.

Then the scene shifts back to Saul’s camp where the king is getting more suspicious of everyone. He even accuses his own court officials of disloyalty.

Saul then summons the priest Ahimelech into his court and puts him on trial for treason. Ahimelech shows himself to be a man of great honor, integrity and courage. He could have lied or thrown David under the bus; instead he defends Saul’s hated enemy. Doeg steps forward and testifies to how Ahimelech had helped David with food and a sword. Then when David’s own men refuse to execute Ahimelech and his fellow priests, Doeg comes forward and is happy to carry out the execution of the innocent men.

Then Saul goes to the town of Nob and puts all of the people—men, women and children—under the ban of destruction, something he failed to do with the

Amalekites, Israel’s hated enemies. One priest, Abiathar, escapes and tells David about the terrible thing that has happened to Ahimelech and his colleagues. David blames himself for the massacre.

## CHAPTER 23: Saul’s pursuit of David continues

*“David and his men wondered from place to place.”* (v.13)

While fleeing from Saul, David hears that the Philistines have been making raids on Keilah, a town near Judah. After consulting God, David and his men attack and defeat the Philistines.

**Verses 7-13.** When Saul hears that David is in Keilah, he thinks God is giving him an opportunity to catch and kill David. He is of course wrong, for God is on David’s side. These verses show David at prayer in a time of danger.

**Verses 15-18.** David and Jonathan meet for the last time. Jonathan acknowledges that David will be king. Jonathan’s presence and words of assurance help David during this difficult time in his life. The rest of the chapter describes Saul’s attempt to catch David and how David escapes from Saul.

## CHAPTER 24: David spares Saul

*“The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master....”* (v.7)

In his pursuit of David, Saul goes into a cave to go to the bathroom. Unbeknownst to him, David and his men are hiding in the innermost recesses of the cave. Saul spends the night in the cave, presenting David with an opportunity to kill him. But having reflected on the matter, David decides that he cannot kill the Lord’s anointed (v.7).

Then a moving conversation occurs between David and Saul in which David seeks to get across to Saul that he is not his enemy and has no desire to harm him. For the moment, Saul realizes David’s goodness and generosity. He even recognizes that someday David will be king.

**Pause:** What advice would you give to someone who is dealing with a boss or co-worker who is out to get them?

## CHAPTER 25: Three cheers for Abigail

*“Let not my lord pay attention to that worthless man Nabal, for he is just a fool.” (v.25)*

The death of Samuel in verse 1 brings to an end the era of the judges.

In need of food, David sends some of his men to visit with a wealthy farmer called Nabal and his wife Abigail. Nabal, whose name means ‘fool’ is described as harsh and ungenerous, while Abigail is said to be intelligent and attractive. It is harvest time when hospitality is extended to strangers.

Nabal is in no mood to be hospitable to David’s men. When David hears of Nabal’s hostility, he plans to kill him and his family, which would have been a disastrous move for David. The people of Judah (David’s own tribe) would surely rise up against him.

When Abigail hears how Nabal has treated David’s men, she immediately moves into action to prevent the destruction of her family. In her conversation with David, she says all the right things, beginning by saying that her husband is a worthless fool. Abigail models the way of “buttering up” a man’s ego to stop him from doing something really bad. David accepts Abigail’s apology and offer of food, and decides not to attack Nabal.

When Abigail tells Nabal of her encounter with David, he suffers a stroke and dies shortly after. The biblical writers see Nabal’s death as an act of God—God punishing his chosen people’s enemy. When David hears of Nabal’s death, he seizes the opportunity and marries the attractive, smart and wealthy widow of Nabal.

**Pause:** What speaks to you most in this chapter? When someone offends you, how do you generally seek to deal with the situation? Do you tend to be more like David or Abigail?

## CHAPTER 26: David spares Saul’s life again

This chapter is almost a repeat of chapter 24. The underlining point here is that God is clearly on David’s side—allowing him to go into Saul’s ‘bedroom’ without being noticed. Saul, now in a weakened state, admits his wrongful action against David and he blesses him (v.25).

## CHAPTER 27: David, an exile amongst the Philistines

*“If I meet with your approval, let me have a place to live in one of the country towns.” (v.5)*

Recognizing that Saul has no desire to make a lasting peace with David, and fed up of being on the run, David and his men surprisingly go and live amongst the Philistines.

While amongst the Philistines, David conducts raids against some local troublemakers. Achish, the Philistine, believes David is fighting his own people but, in fact, he is attacking the enemies of *both* the Philistines and Israelites. In reporting back to Achish, David lies, believing—we can assume—that his lie is justified in a war situation. In his raids on the Amalekites, Israel’s hated enemy, David kills *everyone*, not because he is a brutal murderer, but because he is afraid that any survivors would report back to Achish that he really is not fighting against his own people.

**28:1-3.** David finds himself in a big pickle, when Achish tells him that he is about to go to war against the Israelites, and he wants David to play a key role in the battle. David’s words, “You shall learn what your servant can do,” are intended to feign loyalty to Achish while in his heart, he has no intention to fight his own people. Fortunately for David, as we shall see in chapter 29, he does not have to fight his own people.

## CHAPTER 28: Saul consults a medium

*Saul consulted the Lord, but the Lord gave no answer.... Then Saul said...find me a medium....” (vv 6-7)*

Saul’s last days are desperate and sad. When he receives no answers from God to his questions about how to handle a Philistine invasion, he panics and seeks out a medium to help him consult the ghost of Samuel. The dead prophet offers no comfort, but instead reminds Saul that God has rejected him as king and that he and his sons will lose both the upcoming battle and their lives. When Saul hears Samuel’s words of his demise, he falls to the ground, powerless and as good as dead. Feeling sorry for Saul, the medium prepares what would be Saul’s last meal. Commenting on the incident of Saul seeking to communicate with the dead, a footnote in *The New American Bible* states:

*“Human beings cannot communicate at will with the souls of the dead. God may, however, permit a departed soul to appear to the living and even to disclose things unknown to them. Saul’s own prohibition of necromancy and divination (v.3) was in keeping with the consistent teaching of the Old Testament. If we are to credit the reality of the apparition to Saul, it was due, not to the summons of the witch, but to God’s will; the woman merely furnished the occasion.”* (p.293)

**Pause:** To what extent have you sought or do you seek to have a relationship with deceased loved ones?

### **CHAPTER 29: David is dismissed from the Philistine army**

God is with David even in a foreign land. It seems he has no option but to fight with the Philistines against his own people, something we can assume he does not want to do. God, using some of Achish’s generals, sees to it that David and his men get fired from the Philistine army. Even though Achish totally trusts David, his generals do not, and so David is sent home.

### **CHAPTER 30: David and the Amalekites**

*Nothing was missing, small or great, booty or sons or daughters of all that the Amalekites had taken.”* (v.19)

The narrator keeps us in suspense concerning the battle between Saul and the Philistines as he turns to the adventures of David.

Fired from the Philistine army, David and his men return to Ziklag, the city Achish had assigned to David and his soldiers when they sought asylum from Saul.

When David and his men return to their exile home, they discover that their old enemy, the Amalekites, have come and burned the city, and taken all the inhabitants captive. David’s wives as well as all the wives and children of the soldiers have all been taken captive. This great loss led to extensive weeping: *“They wept aloud until they could weep no more”* (v.4).

The soldiers become so mad at David, their hero, that they are ready to stone him. They probably believe that David should have left security guards to protect their families. In his moment of great crisis, David turns to the Lord. *“With renewed trust in the Lord,”* he asks the Lord if he should go after the Amalekites. The Lord gives David the green light and promises him a victory (vv 6-9).

In his journey, David receives providential help in the person of a sick Egyptian slave whom the Amalekites have abandoned. The slave is able to lead David and his men to the Amalekites who are whooping it up. Their big party is about to be crashed in a way they will never forget. After killing the Amalekites, David and his men are able to rescue their wives and children and all the ‘stuff’ that the Amalekites have taken. *“Nothing was missing, small or great, booty or sons or daughters, of all the Amalekites had taken. David brought back everything....”* (v.19).

The story teller obviously seeks to convey how much God is watching out for David and his people.

An outsider might observe that David was much more ruthless than the Amalekites for they “killed no one” (v.2), while David nearly killed all of them.

Responding to the question that we may have about the above incident, scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann, writes: *“The narrative is not written for outsiders. It is for insiders, those committed to and smitten with David, who find in David the desperate fulfillment of the dreams of this company that has been too long exploited. It is only because of David that the abuse and exploitation of Israel by the Amalekites will stop”* (ibid, p.203).

**Verses 21-31—Division of the spoils.** When it comes to dividing up the spoils, the fighting troops refuse to share with the soldiers who were too exhausted to go into battle. David wants to have nothing to do with such a greedy proposal. He asks how they could act like this considering how good God has been to them. In David’s eyes, there are to be no second-class citizens. David even shares some of the booty with the people of Judah.

**Pause:** What speaks to you most in chapter 30? What causes us to be greedy with the Lord’s blessings?

## CHAPTER 31: Death of Saul and his sons

*“Saul, his three sons, and his armor-bearer died together on that same day.” (v.6)*

David’s military success in the south is in stark contrast to the scene at the battle of Gilboa where Saul and his army had suffered a crushing defeat. Saul dies along with his three sons, including Jonathan. Not wanting to die at the hands of the Philistines, Saul asks his faithful armor-bearer to kill him. He refuses. Then *“Saul took his own sword and fell up on it”* (v.4). Verse 7 tells us the devastating effect that the defeat at Gilboa had on the Israelites.

*“When the Israelites on the slope of the valley and those along the Jordan saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they too abandoned their cities and fled. Then the Philistines came and lived in those cities.”*

The Philistines’ victory at Gilboa pretty much puts Israel back in the position they were in before the monarchy began. They would have to learn the lesson that the monarchy *itself* would not save Israel. They may have needed a king, but not just any king. They needed a king who would always accept that God was their *real* king.

***Verses 11-13—An act of bravery by Saul’s loyal supporters.*** 1Samuel ends with an act of bravery by some of Saul’s supporters. When the people of Jabedgilead hear what the Philistines have done to the body of their dead king and his sons, a group of soldiers goes to get the bodies. Publicly showing themselves to be supporters of Saul was probably an act of considerable risk. But they are willing to do this for one who has saved them from the Ammonites (11:1-5), for one that they have come to love. *“They rescued the memory of Saul from mockery and dismissal”* (Brueggemann).

**Pause:** What are your thoughts and feelings about Saul?