

Whose Interpretation?

1 Samuel 23:1-24:22

How do you work out what God's doing in the various circumstances of your life? It's the first day of your holidays. You've planned this trip for ages. Your anticipation levels are appropriately peaked. You've pushed yourself to clear your desk at work. You wake up with a solid case of the flu. What's God doing?

- Trying to tell you you work too hard and should have planned this trip a month earlier?
- Challenging your concept of stewardship and the amount you spend on holidays?
- Wanting you to push yourself through the discomfort barrier and be joyful in all circumstances?
- Expecting you to go ahead with your plans and trust He'll miraculously heal you?

How do you work out what God wants you to do in those sorts of situations? Are we supposed to try to second-guess God? Does God act in ways that should be predictable by our human minds?

With those questions in mind, let's make our way through these next two chapters of 1 Samuel. There are four separate incidents in these chapters:

- David rescuing Keilah from the Philistines.
- Jonathan visiting David.
- The Ziphites betraying David to Saul.
- David sparing Saul's life.

We'll work our way through each one in turn.

David and Keilah

David hears the Israelites in Keilah are in trouble. They do all the hard work – clear the fields, plant the crops, do

the harvesting, thresh out the grain – and then the Philistines come along and pinch all their grain. It's not fair. But more importantly, what'll they eat for the next few months?

Who should be doing something about this? Saul. He's the king. He should look after his people. He's appointed to deal with the Philistine threat. But he's nowhere in sight. He's too busy planning David's capture. David hears about the Israelites in Keilah and goes to help. He does what the king should do.

But, before he goes, he checks with God. Remember at the end of chapter 22, the sole surviving priest from Nob, Abiathar, joins David. Well, verse 6 tells us he brought the ephod with him. This contained the means for getting God's direction – the Urim and Thummim. As I said a few weeks back, we don't know exactly how this worked, but it was used to find out God's answers to questions. That's what David does here. God says: Go.

David's men, however, aren't convinced (verse 3). They think they've got a pretty good understanding of the situation. They're wandering around Judah, hiding out from Saul as best they can. Their lives are in constant danger. They're doing their best to stay out of any more trouble. Going off to attack some Philistines will only bring more trouble. Then they'll have both Saul and the Philistines chasing them. That can't be what God wants. Surely God's got His hands full just protecting them from Saul. Why throw another problem into the mix?

David checks with God again. God gives the same answer. So, off they go. And it happens just as God

says. They defeat the Philistines. They save Keilah.

But then comes a twist in verse 7. Saul hears of David's operation and look what he says:

God has handed him over to me, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars.

That's how Saul reads the circumstances of his life. He sees God's hand at work for him.

At this point, the astute reader should be asking: How could Saul possibly think that? What have we been told about Saul so far?

- God rejected him as king over Israel because he wouldn't pay attention to God's word.
- God's taken His prophet from Saul.
- God's taken His Spirit from Saul.
- Saul's executed God's priests and driven the remaining one into the arms of David – along with the ephod.

And what do we know of Saul's mission to kill David? Has David committed a capital offence in Israel? Has David lifted his hand against the king? No. It all comes from Saul's jealousy – from the evil inside Saul's heart.

Given all that – all that trampling on the relationship with God and the actual evil of what Saul's trying to do – how could Saul possibly think God's given David into his hands? But he does. That's what sin's like. In its very essence, it's self-centred. It grips us with self-deception. We can justify anything – and impress ourselves that we're being godly in the process. It still happens today.

- Christians commit adultery because they convince themselves God's arranged circumstances so they fall in love with someone who's not their spouse.

- Christians squander money on themselves because they're convinced God wants them to be prosperous and enjoy to the full all the opportunities available in the culture He's placed them in.

But it's not just the so-called big things. The Bible tells us our hearts are deceitfully wicked. As I pay attention to God's word, and as I examine my heart in the light of God's word, I see the truth of this. And I can read the circumstances of my life as evidence of God's providence – as evidence that God wants me to go ahead and do what I've already decided I want to do quite apart from whether it's a truly godly decision.

- A CD or DVD that's on special may become an excuse to indulge myself.
- Someone asking for prayer points may become an excuse to gossip.
- A young lady dressed immodestly may become an excuse to lust.

The point is: circumstances in themselves are rarely sufficient to determine what God wants or what God's doing. Our hearts are sufficiently corrupt to twist any circumstances for our own advantage – to interpret them as if God supports what we want to do – and to convince ourselves God supports our corrupt thinking.

A second twist comes in verse 12. David hears of Saul's plans to come and get him at Keilah. For some reason, he's a bit uneasy about these guys. He's just rescued them from starvation, but he's not sure how far their gratitude extends. Saul wasn't particularly merciful to the priests at Nob because of what he thought they did for David. Others may fear getting on the wrong side of Saul. So,

once again, David inquires of God. He asks whether the good citizens of Keilah will give him up to Saul. God says they will. So, David and his men leave.

A lot of modern Christians would protest at this point. They'd tell God this wasn't the way it's supposed to work. They did what God told them. They rescued Keilah. God's supposed to reward them. He's supposed to bless them. He should give them a bit of rest and recreation in Keilah – not send them back out into the desert regions. Even more so for the guy who's God's anointed king. David did the right thing. He did what God told him to do. There's no suggestion he got part of it wrong. Yet, still he's being chased around the countryside by Saul. The second half of verse 14:

Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.

David and Jonathan

The second story comes as a small break in the constant chase. Jonathan turns up. Saul can't get his hands on David, but Saul's son has no problems finding him. The narrator tells us, Jonathan helped David *find strength in God*. He does this by what he says.

First, he tells David: *Don't be afraid. Saul won't lay a hand on you.* Jonathan has confidence in God and what God's doing. Now, if you sat Jonathan down and asked him if he could articulate everything God was doing, he wouldn't be able to tell you. He didn't understand why God kept David running around the desert. But he knew David was under God's protection. He expresses in words what we see demonstrated in the two incidents on either side. God keeps Saul from getting his hands on

David. Saul can try as hard as he likes, but he won't outwit God.

Secondly, Jonathan tells David he will become king. In doing so, he also indicates that he himself, as the crown prince, won't stand in David's way. The point is: God can be trusted to keep His promise. Jonathan's vision of how that promise will work out is wrong. He thinks he'll be alongside David as his chief officer. That wasn't part of God's promise – and it doesn't happen. But what God has promised, that will come about – and so David need not be afraid.

David and the Ziphites

Jonathan leaves and the hunt continues. Some other characters – the Ziphites – put their hands up. They tell Saul they know where David is and they're willing to hand him over. We're not told why they do this – what was in it for them – just that they volunteer to betray God's anointed king.

Perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on them. There's a good chance they don't know Samuel's anointed David as God's king. They simply know the current king wants to capture this guy. They haven't seen the current affairs programs questioning the validity of Saul's arrest warrants. They're just good, law-abiding citizens trying to do the right thing by the king.

But whatever their knowledge and motives may be, Saul's ecstatic. He thinks Christmas has come early. Again, notice his pious religious language in verse 21:

The LORD bless you for your concern for me.

The Lord bless you for betraying an innocent man. The

Lord bless you for helping me when He won't. The Lord bless you for assisting my anti-God campaign. Is God likely to uphold the blessing of this man?

Anyway, Saul wants to make sure nothing goes wrong this time. He doesn't want to turn up too early and scare David off before he's got his trap fully in place. He sends the Ziphites back to gather intelligence.

- Find out exactly where he is.
- Get the numbers of his personnel.
- Work out all the possible escape routes.
- What outside support is likely to turn up?

Saul leaves nothing to chance.

Presumably the Ziphites do this, because in verse 25 Saul turns up. Now the chase is on in earnest.

- David goes to the Desert of Maon; Saul goes to the Desert of Maon.
- David's on one side of the mountain; Saul's on the other side.

The noose is tightening. David's about to be captured.

Then God steps in. Well, that's not exactly what the text says. Verse 27:

A messenger came to Saul, saying, "Come quickly! The Philistines are raiding the land." Then Saul broke off his pursuit of David and went to meet the Philistines.

Coincidence? Luck? This is God's doing. It's His sovereign hand at work.

- Remember verse 14 – God did not give David into Saul's hands.
- Remember verse 17 – My father Saul won't lay a hand on you.

This is God's doing.

But notice how He does it.

- He doesn't send David a message: David, if you want to escape Saul, take a left turn at the Big Rocks. There's nothing like that. God just intervenes without consulting or instructing David.
- And God uses David's – and Israel's – enemies to do it. Imagine if God said to the Philistines: you know the guy who stunned Goliath with that lucky shot? Well, if you invade Israel right now, you can save his life. They'd have stayed home and played cricket. But God arranged for them to be in Israel at the right time. And He arranged for the message to get to Saul at the right time.

And so David's rescued once again.

One preacher put it something like this: God's not a cookie-cutter. You can't box God into a mould. You can't say: This is how God's got to do it every time. God used the ephod in Keilah to get David out of trouble. God's got to communicate by the ephod every time. God is freely sovereign to do things however He wants to. And God is freely sovereign to use as much variety as He wants to. His style isn't cramped by our puny ideas – nor by what our puny minds can imagine. He's much bigger than that. The way He orders circumstances is much bigger than that. The way he guides us is much bigger than that. He doesn't have to fit into the way we tell Him He has to do things.

David and Saul

The fourth incident's about David and Saul. We're told nothing about the battle with the Philistines. Presumably

Saul won – because he does the pursuing. But that battle isn't really relevant to what the narrator wants to tell us. So, he passes over it and gets back to the main event. It's pretty clear Saul also sees this as the main event. Now that he's got rid of those pesky Philistines, he gets on with his main purpose in life: hunting David.

Saul wants to use the bathroom. Unfortunately, they didn't have government sponsored rest-stops scattered around southern Judah – he really must look into that once all this revenue's freed up from chasing David. He does find a cave where he can have a bit of privacy. But it's not really all that private, because David and his men happen to be hiding in that cave. So, we've got Saul alone and very vulnerable.

What are you to make of those circumstances? David's men have no doubts. Verse 4:

This is the 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".

Or, if you look at the NIV footnote:

Today the LORD is saying to you, "I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish".

The first talks about a prophecy some time in the past that these guys line up directly with the current circumstances. The second says this current situation is so obvious it's clear what the right thing to do is – even if you don't have a prophecy telling you. They're saying:

Look David. God's hand's obviously in this. You're a righteous sufferer. You've done nothing wrong, but you're an outlaw constantly fleeing for your life. Here's your God-given chance to end all this pain and

suffering – both yours and ours.

Have they interpreted the situation correctly? Well, what's so obvious to them isn't at all obvious to David. As far as David's concerned, Saul's still God's anointed king. If God wants to remove His anointed one, that's fine – but it's not David's place to step in and do it off his own bat. In other words, godly principles determine how you act, not fortuitous circumstances. You don't look at the circumstances and simply do what feels right in the situation. Our deceitful hearts often "feel right" about things God says are wrong. No – the important thing is to know what God says is right – and then to interpret the circumstances on that basis. This is how to distinguish between temptation and providence. As far as David's concerned, he's confident that it's evil to kill God's anointed king. It's evil to take vengeance into his own hands. He continues to trust God to bring about His purposes at His time.

He does, however, sneak down and cut off part of Saul's robe. Then we get verse 5:

Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe.

Why conscience-stricken? Is he worried about damaging someone else's property? If that were the case, he'd need to make reparation – and there's nothing of that in what follows. No – the clue is in what he says in verse 6:

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.

David sees his action in cutting off part of Saul's robe as an action against God's anointed king. It's not just a robe he's cut – it's the king's robe. The king's robe signified

the king's authority and the king's rule. To take that is to symbolise the taking of the kingdom – it's to declare a rival claim to royal authority. While we know it's a true claim – because David is also God's anointed and thus has God's promise of the kingdom – for David to take this initiative even in symbolic declaration is to act against God's currently anointed king. And because the king is set aside and consecrated to God, to attack him is to attack God. Thus, David is conscience-stricken – and in this way we see the big difference between David and Saul. David's not perfect, but when he's confronted with his sin he responds with repentance.

Saul leaves the cave and David follows him out. His repentance takes immediate action. He prostrates himself before Saul. He declares his loyalty to Saul. He places himself at Saul's mercy. He's on the ground – exposed and very vulnerable. That's the cost of his repentance. It demonstrates the extent of his trust in God and God's promise.

It doesn't mean he thinks Saul's innocent. His speech makes that quite clear. He doesn't hold back in that regard. He asks God to judge between them – twice – verse 12 and verse 16. He quotes a proverb in verse 13:

From evildoers come evil deeds.

He quotes it to explain why his own hand won't be raised against Saul. But he's also just finished talking about the wrongs Saul's done to him.

Saul responds in verse 16. He acknowledges the rightness of what David's said. He acknowledges that David's spared his life. He acknowledges that's not the usual way to treat an enemy. And he says the same thing Jonathan

said – verse 20:

I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands.

And he goes home. This is the best chance Saul's had to kill David – he's got his army; David's men are stuck in a cave and David's on the ground before him at his mercy (there may be some distance between them, but Saul's been given the upper hand) – and Saul goes home. Again, God keeps David safe.

Interpreting your Life

So, come back to the question we started with. Can you look at the circumstances of your life and definitively work out what God's doing? When you hit some speed-hump in the journey of your life, can you know for sure why God put it there? The short answer is: perhaps. Doesn't seem very helpful, does it? That's because we don't always ask the right question and we keep wanting to play God. We want certainty. We want answers to *our* questions. We think if only we can understand what God's doing, then we'll be able to give Him permission to go ahead and do it. God asks us to trust Him – to believe that He truly is sovereign and He really does know what He's doing.

So we need to focus on what the Bible does tell us.

- First, we see here a small sampling of the variety of ways God acts. He's not limited to what we can think up. He's not limited to how we think He should do it. He's free to act the way He wants.
- Secondly, we see the danger of trying to second-guess God solely on the basis of our circumstances. Some things that can seem so obvious aren't right. And, in addition, we must allow for the sinfulness

and self-deception of our own hearts.

- Thirdly, we must trust God's word. The word that's constant through this passage is God's promise that David would be king. On the surface, that promise isn't very helpful to us. It's pretty specific to David. It's not a promise God's made to us.

Yet, we know God's promise to David is the forerunner of a greater promise to David's greater descendant. David is God's chosen king for Israel – but he's far from perfect. We've seen that already. While he'll be a great king, he's not *the* king who'll save God's people from their real enemy – the enemy that prevents them wholeheartedly serving God.

That King is Jesus – the One who comes as David's greater descendant; the One who comes to deal with the real enemy of sin and death. He trusted God's word completely. How did that trust work out in His life?

- Like David, He faced much suffering.
- Like David, He had enemies seeking His life.
- Like David, those enemies continued after Him even when He obeyed God's word.
- Like David, He was betrayed.
- Unlike David, His enemies killed Him.

Even in death, He trusted God's promise – and God vindicated Him by raising Him from death.

And it's through Him – and only through Him – that God's promise comes to us. Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

It's not a promise of a trouble-free life. It's not a promise

that we won't suffer – even when we obey God. It's not a promise that we won't have enemies chasing us. It's not a promise that we'll always understand what's going on. But it is a promise that those things aren't outside God's sovereign rule and that God will use all those things to achieve His good purposes in our lives. And what is His purpose? He tells us in verse 29:

to be conformed to the likeness of His Son

Do you trust that promise? Will you trust it even when you don't understand – even when God doesn't tell you exactly why He allows particular difficulties in your life? And whether you understand or not, will you continue to trust enough to obey God – and not simply to go with the flow of what you think providence presents to you?