

Whose Dilemma?

1 Samuel 27:1-28:25

Sometimes life throws up some difficult situations:

- times when you're not sure what to do; or
- times when you've got a pretty good idea what to do but it just seems so hard.

Issues raised by the euthanasia people are one example. Your loved one's diagnosed with incurable cancer. The prognosis is a very painful two years before death. Why shouldn't we just end their lives and save them all that suffering?

Issues are often raised in wartime. One famous example is related by Corrie ten Boom. She believed lying is wrong. She was asked straight out by the Gestapo if they were hiding Jews in the house. Should she tell the truth?

Not all of them are life-and-death matters. Some of them are everyday decisions.

- What's modest and what isn't?
- Is it ever OK to speed?
- What's excessive spending?
- How much should I do about the environment?

Are there ever circumstances that justify disobeying God?

David's Dilemma

1 Samuel 27 opens with some ominous words:

But David thought to himself, "One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand."

So David and the six hundred men with him left and went over to Achish son of Maoch king of Gath. David and his men settled in Gath with Achish. Each man had his family with him, and David had his two wives: Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel, the widow of Nabal. When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer searched for him.

Those words come as something of a shock. Think through the last few chapters and what God's done.

- David, under God's direction, rescued Keilah and then got out of the place before they betrayed him to Saul.
- The Ziphites betray David's location to Saul – but, just when it looks like Saul's finally got his hands on David, God sends a messenger about a Philistine attack and Saul has to give up the chase.
- Saul comes into the very cave where David's hiding to relieve himself, David cuts off part of his robe and then feels so remorseful he puts himself at Saul's mercy – and Saul realises he's in the wrong.
- David's about to take extreme vengeance on Nabal, but God has Nabal's wife intervene and prevent David from violent bloodshed.
- David's snuck into Saul's camp, removed his spear and water jug, snuck out again and then confronted Saul with what he's done.

It's an impressive list of how God protects His anointed king from Saul's murderous plots. So why does David think to himself and decide Saul's going to get him? Where's the logic in that?

Now I expect most of us can identify with David at some level here – and we can find extenuating circumstances to

excuse this fall in faith.

- It's been a long campaign. Saul's pursuit is fairly relentless. You can understand David being worn down. And, when you're worn down, your emotions are low – you don't always make the right decisions or the most sensible decisions.
- David's got his family to think about. What sort of life is it for them – traipsing around the Judean wilderness? They've got nowhere to call home. They deserve something better.
- And then there's all David's men and their families and the responsibility of keeping them alive and finding them enough food and dealing with their arguments. That'd take its toll on anyone.

But, the bottom line is: this is not a sensible decision. He doesn't consult God. And he seems to have forgotten that God's greater than Saul.

Now there's nothing wrong with having an inner conversation with yourself. Most people do it all the time. Some even do it out loud. But when you have those conversations, make sure you give yourself good advice – right advice – true advice. Make sure God's word's squarely at the centre of what you tell yourself. Make sure you aren't feeding yourself lies – or repeating to yourself lies others have told you.

You really have to wonder at the details of this inner conversation David had. This isn't the first time he's skipped off down to Philistia to escape Saul. He tried it back in 1 Samuel 21. On that occasion, he found the local grapevine working quite well. They knew Israel's recent war ballads – stuff about David killing his ten thousands. And, since most of those corpses were Philistines,

their reception was fairly hostile. David feigned madness – drooling down his beard and scribbling senseless graffiti – in an effort to escape. He was lucky to get out alive. Why's he think it'll be different this time.

But, that's where he goes – and it works.

- Somehow – we're not told exactly – he manages to ingratiate himself into Achish's good books.
- And Saul does give up chasing him. He's done some fairly stupid things because of his jealousy – but following David into enemy territory isn't one of them.

What's more, David and his band even get their own town to live in. David spins some tale about not wanting to be a burden on Achish's limited resources and it'd probably be better all round if he wasn't always in the way under Achish's feet – and Achish falls for it. He gives him Ziklag – which leaves you thinking David must have done something fairly impressive to get such a gift.

And so, David and his band of merry men settle down for over a year. Life's taken a turn for the better – except they've settled into a pattern of deceit and violence.

- David continually deceives Achish as to where he's raiding. Now, I don't think Achish would've minded David raiding these other tribes – the Geshurites and the Girzites and the Amalekites. The Philistines weren't particularly friendly with them. But Achish puts David in Ziklag to deal with the Israelites. He wants evidence David really is a traitor to Israel.
- And to keep up the deception, David must ensure there aren't any survivors. He doesn't want any

stray victim wandering into Achish's court and giving the game away. So he kills everyone.

And the scheme works brilliantly. Verse 12:

Achish trusted David and said to himself: "He has become so odious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant forever".

Now, it's possible you've never thought of this story in quite this way. You may look at David through rose-coloured glasses – he's the good guy; he's the guy after God's own heart. And, if you read through the chapter fairly quickly, you could still feel positive at the end of it. God's looking after David – Saul's not chasing him anymore and God's given him a whole town. David's bringing God's judgment on Israel's enemies. And there's truth in that – but it's not the full picture. The narrator doesn't say so explicitly, but I'm convinced this chapter's a record of David's failures. The Bible doesn't gloss over the sin of its heroes. It gives us the bad bits as well as the good bits – and these are some of the bad bits. David may be God's chosen and anointed king and he may be better than Saul in all sorts of ways, but he's far from ideal. He's as sinful as the rest of us. He's not the ultimate solution to humanity's problems.

And that's shown in 1 Samuel 28:1-2.

In those days the Philistines gathered their forces to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, "You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army."

David said, "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do."

Achish replied, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life."

For all his clever scheming and cunning plans, David messes it up big time. He's in an impossible situation.

- He can come clean with Achish and tell him he's not really a traitor to his country of birth and be instantly executed; or
- He can go into battle on the Philistine side and kill the people he's supposed to rule and perhaps be faced with having to fight and kill God's anointed king. That's political suicide.

And that's where the narrator leaves that story for the moment.

Saul's Dilemma

In 1 Samuel 28:3, the story turns to Saul's dilemma. At the outset, we're told two things. First, Samuel's dead. We've already been told that – back in 25:1. Following that, we were told what Samuel's death meant for David – or rather what it didn't mean. It didn't mean God no longer guided David. It didn't mean God's promise about David being king failed. Now in chapter 28, we see what Samuel's death meant for Saul.

Secondly, we're told Saul had expelled all the mediums and spiritists from the land. That's something Saul did right. In several places, God's law instructed Israel not to resort to these occult practices. People who practised this sort of thing were to be executed. In this, Saul led the people properly. The significance of this is shown as the story unfolds.

Saul's initial problem comes in verse 4:

The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine

army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart.

We're not told why Saul's so terrified. The implication is it's something to do with the relative sizes of the armies – that Saul's vastly outnumbered and has no hope in the coming battle. But it could also be something from God. Ever since David's anointing, we've seen Saul struggle with inner turmoil. God's Spirit leaves him. Saul's overcome with jealousy of David. We've seen he doesn't always act rationally.

In the face of such terror, we see what Saul's made of. It's the difficult circumstances of life that show the inner person – that show where the person's real commitment lies. When everything's going along smoothly in your life, it's easy to come to church and mouth all the right words. It's easy to talk about God's abundant goodness and how He's blessing your life. But when circumstances conspire against you – a serious diagnosis, a financial disaster, a betrayal by your Christian friends – do you still trust God? Do you still obey His will? Or do your actions show your real commitment is somewhere else?

Saul begins by turning to God. Verse 6:

He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets.

Does it seem harsh to you? Here's a guy – the king of God's people no less – wanting direction from God and God doesn't answer him. He's in a desperate situation – God's people are in a desperate situation – and the heaven's are as brass. Why would God keep quiet?

The answer's back in 1 Samuel 15:26 – at the end of the battle with the Amalekites, where Saul failed to fully carry out God's instructions.

But Samuel said to him, "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!"

Saul showed contempt for God's word in the past. He had a clear word from God and he didn't obey it. It wasn't the first time. Since that time, as far as I can see in the text of 1 Samuel, there's no record of God again speaking to Saul – by dreams, Urim, prophets or any other way. It's a just judgment. Saul rejected God's word – God refuses to give Saul His word.

God's word isn't simply for information. It's not a matter of idle curiosity. And it's not a matter of subjecting God's word to our judgment. Some people come to God's word with the wrong attitude:

It'd be nice to know what God says. After all, He's supposed to be pretty wise. So, I'd like to get His opinion. But, after all's said and done, I'm only going to treat it as an opinion. I'll take it into consideration – but I'll make the final decision based on what I think's best.

That may be a good approach to take with your financial adviser, but it's disastrous when relating to God. God is the authority. He created everything else. He owns it. It's all His. It all exists for His purposes. He's the One who's sovereign over the whole system. When He speaks the only appropriate response is to obey. We're not to sit in judgment on God's word and decide if it's acceptable to us.

The reality is we've all sat in judgment on God's word. We do it every time we sin.

- When I steal, I think my evaluation of my need or desire for that thing is more important than God's

evaluation of what's right and wrong.

- When I dream of revenge, I think my need to get even is more important than God's pronouncements about forgiveness and the damage bitterness causes within my inner being.

God is gracious and doesn't take His word from us the first time we do this – nor the thousandth time. But the Bible warns of *hardening the heart*. It's a condition that comes from repeatedly rejecting God's word – of repeatedly putting my opinion above God's authority. The habit becomes ingrained – too strong to break. These days, such a person may actually hear God's word often – they may even come to church every week – but the word has no impact on them. They never hear it in the sense of being convicted by it and paying attention to it and conforming their thoughts and actions to it.

In what follows, Saul shows he hasn't really changed at all. It was open to him to repent. He could've said:

I've been a fool. I've put my own opinion above your word. I've been a real idiot chasing David round the countryside instead of looking to the nation's defence. I don't deserve Your intervention. I deserve Your judgment. But, on the basis of Your mercy, could You please ...

He could've cast himself on God's mercy. But he doesn't. Instead, he turns to a medium. He knows it's wrong – he's knows it's against God's wishes – his earlier actions in getting rid of them show that. But he goes ahead and does it. Sure, he could claim he's desperate. He could say something like: Desperate times call for desperate measures. That never excuses disobedience. Rather, his actions in the midst of his desperation show where his true commitment lies – and it's not with God.

The narrative moves ahead quickly. Saul asks his attendants to find a medium and they do. Some comment on how quickly they're able to do this and suggest that maybe Saul wasn't too serious about getting rid of them. But it may be the narrator simply skips over the period of their search because it's not important to the story.

Saul disguises himself and goes at night. He travels a decent distance, skirting round enemy lines, to find this medium. That's how desperate he is for some guidance. When he gets there, he finds the woman cautious. She's worried about some trap. So he swears an oath – verse 10

Saul swore to her by the LORD, "As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this."

What sort of oath is that?

I'm going to assure you by swearing an oath in Yahweh's name. Yahweh's the God who says mediums should be executed. But, in His name, I promise you nothing bad will happen to you for disobeying Yahweh by doing this.

Again, it shows Saul lacks a commitment to God's word. He wants to hear from God – it seems the right thing to do – but he only wants to hear on his own terms; not on God's terms.

The woman brings up Samuel. At this point, we've got all sorts of questions.

- Is the woman genuine?
- Is this really Samuel or an evil spirit masquerading?
- Can you get reliable information through mediums?

And so on. They're all good questions and I think it's good to ask them – but this text doesn't answer all our questions. I'll just say two things:

- First, it seems it really is Samuel who appears.
- Secondly, the Old Testament doesn't forbid the practice of using mediums because it's false – because it's all a con. It forbids it because it's evil. It's not trusting God. It's not relying on God's word and God's truth and looking elsewhere.

Saul asks Samuel for help. Verse 15:

I am in great distress. The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.

At that point, it's pretty obvious to all but Saul. God's not answering me, so I'll turn to the guy who used to be God's prophet when he was alive. I'll see if I can get God to answer me that way. He just can't seem to see the basic flaw in his logic.

Samuel does – and he's happy to point it out. Verse 16:

Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what He predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours – to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out His fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today.

Just as God's word of promise to David will happen, so also God's word of judgment to Saul will happen. God keeps His word.

But then Samuel does give Saul a specific word. It seems Saul's plan to go to the medium works. He forces a word out of God. Verse 19:

The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines.

And so Saul eventually gets the word he's after – but it's not really the word he's after. It's a word of doom and despair.

And that's how Saul reacts. Verse 20:

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words.

Still he doesn't repent. Even faced with this strong word of judgment, he does nothing about getting right with God.

Learning from Dilemmas

These two chapters are fairly depressing.

- David, God's anointed king-in-waiting, follows his own thinking and gets himself in a mess.
- Saul, God's rejected reigning king, finds himself in a mess and disobeys God in trying to find some way out of it.

This is how Israel's leaders behave. What hope is there for the ordinary civilian under their leadership?

If you think carefully about these chapters, you'll realise the narrator doesn't stick to strict chronological order. The events of chapter 29 – where David's rescued from his dilemma and sent back to Ziklag – happen before the Philistines get to Shunem (where Saul sees them in 28:4). The narrator puts in this stuff about Saul and the medium at an earlier point. Why?

- It adds to the tension with David. We're left hanging in relation to his impossible situation. We want

to know how he gets out of it – but we have to wait.

- It puts David and Saul side-by-side. They both face dilemmas and they both act apart from faith. We probably expect that from Saul by now – but we don't expect it from David.

The reality is: neither of these guys is the ultimate solution for the human dilemma. They're both part of the problem. Both of them fail to fully trust God. We knew that already about Saul. His disobedience led to his rejection back in chapter 15. But what are we to do with David? We know he'll be king – because God's promised him that. Yet, is he any better than Saul? People argue back and forth about the relative merits of the two – and there's some truth in what they say – but, in the long run, David's a sinful person just like the rest of us. He may provide godly leadership at times, but he also commits some capital offences. He's not God's ultimate solution.

For that, we wait for Jesus. Think of the dilemma He faced:

- beaten and mocked by Roman soldiers;
- the extreme pain of crucifixion;
- the ugliness of human sin placed on Him;
- abandoned by His Father.

Yet, through it all, He trusted God. He didn't abandon the path set for Him. He drank the cup of God's wrath right to the bitter end. He did that for us – that we may be forgiven and renewed and brought into God's kingdom.

Those who respond to what Jesus did – those who take up the offer of forgiveness and eternal life – are called to trust God, even in the midst of life's dilemmas.

- Unlike David, we're to carefully weigh the options

on the basis of godly wisdom. We must be careful of being deceived by false ideas – like thinking Saul's bound to catch him if he stays in Israel.

- Unlike Saul, we're not to pursue options forbidden by God when we think the going gets too tough or when God seems to be silent. We're to continue to trust God's promise to us – that He'll never abandon us.

We'll still fail. But, in that failure we have a word of encouragement and a word of warning.

- Encouragement because even David's stupidity and sin didn't prevent God bringing about His promise.
- Warning because we remain responsible for both our stupid and sinful actions – and we must be careful lest our hearts be hardened by repeatedly rejecting God's word.