

“Trusting in the Providence of God”
Sermon Series on *the Life of David* #6
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
(1 Sam. 24:1-22)
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Introduction.

Many years ago, when I was about 10-years-old, while on vacation my family went to Carlsbad Caverns in southeastern New Mexico. I was fascinated by all the stalactites and stalagmites and the various rock formations down in the depths of that big cave. It was dark and damp and a little bit creepy deep in the bowls of the earth, but the thing that gave me the heebeegeebees the most were the bats! They would fly out from nowhere and scare you half to death. When we completed the tour, I wasn't too eager to go back down in that cave!

Caves are interesting places. Not many of us choose to spend much time in them, unless we must. Even though spelunking is a popular sport with some people, most of us would just as soon stay out in the open air on top of the earth as go inside a cave. My late wife Lorie went spelunking once when she was in college, and she said it was one of the most frightening experiences of her life. She also said she wouldn't have gone down into that cave in the first place if she didn't like Jimmy Meldrum so much! You ask, "Who was Jimmy Meldrum?" Well, that's a different story for another sermon!

Mark Twain had a different take on caves, and he once wrote, "Cave is a good word.... The memory of a cave I used to know was always in my mind, with its lofty passages, its silence and solitude,...it's fleeting lights, and more than all, its sudden revelations...."¹

Three thousand years ago, David found out that Mark Twain was right about caves, and we read about it here in our passage this morning. As we study this text today, I want you to notice three things about this passage in particular: David's life in the wilderness; Saul's experience in the cave; and learning to trust in God.

I. David's Life in the Wilderness.

In one of his books John Ortberg observed² that the Bible tells us that for a long time David enjoyed a remarkable string of successes. He was secretly anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the next king of Israel when he was a young man. The reigning king, whose name was Saul, chose David to be his armor bearer, and he served in the king's court as a musician. Then David defeated Israel's most formidable enemy when he slayed Goliath. As a result the army loved him, and

people sang songs about him. David trusted in God, and for a long time everything he touched turned to gold.

Then a strange thing happened. One by one all those wonderful things were stripped away. He lost his job. He lost his security. He lost his wife Michal, and his spiritual mentor Samuel died. Saul was jealous of David, and the king tried to kill him on several occasions. So, David fled to a place in the wilderness named Ramah and spent much of the next ten years of his life on the run. Whereas David once had wealth and power, fame and friends, security and a bright future, now he was running for his life in the wilderness and living in a cave.

En Gedi is a small oasis alongside the Dead Sea, which is a large salt lake in the southeastern corner of Israel. I've been there before. Today there's a little park that has a cluster of palm trees. There is even a stand where you can buy soft drinks and snacks, and there's a bathhouse for changing and rinsing off the salt after you swim. However, about 300 yards to the west there are a number of cliffs that rise about 2,000 feet above the plain which has a plateau at the top. The cliffs are deeply grooved by erosion over the years which make for a series of canyons and caves. The wilderness of En Gedi is a vast expanse of badlands, and it's an area that is as harsh and inhospitable as you are likely to find on earth. It was in this wilderness in the cave of En Gedi that David and his fighting men took refuge.

Over the years I've come to realize that in Scripture the wilderness is both a *geographical fact* and a *spiritual metaphor*. It's a time of testing and a time for clarifying one's values and priorities. It's also an occasion where we have an opportunity to get our relationship with God straight. But it's never an easy journey, and no one ever goes to the wilderness willingly unless he/she must. Usually, God sends you there. You'll recall that God sent Moses and the people of Israel into the Sinai wilderness for 40 years. The Holy Spirit sent Jesus in the Judean wilderness for 40 days, and circumstances sent David into the wilderness of Ramah for the better part of 10 years. In the midst of his wilderness wanderings, David took refuge in the cave of En Gedi.

Ortberg writes³ that the cave is where you end up when your props are stripped away. It's where you find yourself when you thought you were going to accomplish great things, have a great family, boldly go where no one had ever gone before, but then it becomes clear that things aren't going to work out quite the way you dreamed they would. Sometimes you're in the cave because of your own foolish choices. Sometimes it's a result of circumstances beyond your control. Many times it's a combination of the two.

Are you in a cave right now? Perhaps you recently lost your job, or your dreams have been shattered. Maybe a mentor, a best friend, or spouse has died. Or perhaps a relationship on which you counted has taken a wrong turn. Maybe

it's a physical condition, and you've lost your health. Or perhaps you just feel like you're all alone in the world in the cave by yourself.

If you're not in a cave right now, wait a while. You will be. No one ever plans on ending up in the cave, but sooner or later everybody spends some time there. I know I have. The hardest thing about being in the cave is that you begin to wonder if God has lost track of you. Did He forget His promises? Does He remember where I am? Will I ever be anywhere but in this cave?

But there is one other thing you need to know about the cave. It's also where God does some of His best work, and it's where He shapes and molds the human heart. Sometimes, when all the props and crutches in your life get stripped away, that's when you discover you still have God. And then you find out at the end of the day He is all you really needed.

II. Saul's Experience in the Cave.

Once again, as he had done so often before, Saul was pursuing David, trying to take his life. He saw David as a threat and a rival to his throne, and the king's jealousy and anger consumed him. Saul was obsessed with tracking down David. This time Saul had 3,000 men with him – quite a large army. David and his small band of fugitives were hiding in a cave trying to escape detection, and En Gedi was a perfect hideout. The lush vegetation provided a screen, and the caves were above the plain. And from that vantage point you could see everything. That's when Saul felt the call of nature. He had to go to the bathroom, and he sought out a cave to relieve himself.

Ironically, he went right into the very cave where David and his men were hiding out. It's a great scene in the Bible. Saul couldn't see anything very clearly because his eyes were still adjusting to the darkness of the cave, and there he crouched to take care of his business.

What vulnerability! It was the perfect opportunity for David to take revenge on the man who had been so unfair to him, the one who repeatedly tried to take his life. Saul was the cause of all of David's heartache, and now David had the perfect opportunity for payback. David's companions realized the opportune nature of the situation, and they urged him to strike the king down. It would have been so easy to conclude, "Look at the opening God has given for you! Take advantage of it!"

Instead, David quietly crawled over to where Saul was, and he cut off a portion of the king's robe. David resisted the temptation to take Saul's life when he had the chance and instead said to 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...*" (24:6). David respected the divine authority behind the throne of the king, and he refused to usurp that authority when he had the chance. The task to remove the king would be up to God, not David.

After Saul finished his business, he walked down the ravine to the other side. When he got far enough away, David appeared outside the cave and he called to the king. Clutching the piece of Saul's robe in his hand, David not only alerted Saul, but he also bowed down to him. Then he explained what had just transpired and how he resisted the opportunity to take the king's life.

Seeing the piece of his robe in David's hand, Saul realized the mercy of David's restraint. And he acknowledged that David was the better man. He even recognized and admitted that David was going to be the next king of Israel. Then Saul asked him for a favor, and he requested that whenever David assumed the throne, he would spare the lives of Saul's family. Years later, David kept that promise, and he was a man of his word.

The desire for revenge is one of the most powerful temptations in life, isn't it? You want to get even; you want to settle the score. Is there someone in your life today with whom you want to get even? Are you tempted to take revenge? How does this passage speak to your situation? It's so easy in a moment like this to become bitter and resentful, and we naturally want to get even. But God calls us to a different way of living and a higher standard of conduct. He invites us to allow God to be our defender and our advocate, and He wants us instead to trust Him. That leads to the final matter I want to talk about this morning.

III. Learning to Trust in God.

I believe the best thing to do in times of conflict is *not* to take matters into your own hands but to trust the Lord with it all. It never benefits anyone to fly off the handle and take revenge, and the satisfaction of vengeance is short-lived and turns bitter pretty quickly. Whenever we try to manipulate a situation to our own ends, it often backfires and usually makes the problem worse. The better approach is to trust God and commit your cause to Him.

Our God is a sovereign God, and nothing escapes His notice. He sees every situation in which we experience injustice or the failure of people to do the right thing. He notes the times when we get the short end of the stick, or even the complete shaft, and in the long run He is in a better position to judge than we are. Our perspective is limited, we can only see so far, and God is the only One who really knows the whole story and what is going on beneath the surface of things.

That's why you and I can trust God when things aren't fair. He is righteous and He is good, and He will make things right one day – maybe not right away or perhaps not even in this present world of ours, but eventually and in a complete and ultimate way sometime down the road. Our job isn't to take revenge but to trust that the Lord is big enough and He's good enough to work it out in a way He thinks best. If He loved us so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross for our sins, then He can be trusted to make things right eventually.

David trusted in God. Listen to the psalm he wrote about this incident when he was in this cave in En Gedi.

*Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,
for in You my soul takes refuge.*

*I will take refuge in the shadow of Your wings
until the disaster has passed.*

*I cry out to God Most High,
to God, who fulfills His promises for me.*

*He sends from heaven and saves me,
rebuking those who hotly pursue me;
God sends His love and His faithfulness.*

*They spread a net for my feet.
I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path,
but they have fallen into it themselves.*

*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.*

(Psalm 57)

That's the song of a person who found refuge in God – in the wilderness, in the cave. David was able to keep his head through it all because he learned that when everything else is stripped away, when you're out in the wilderness living in a cave, God is still there with you and He will see you through. You can trust in Him.

Are you in a tough spot these days? Is someone treating you with injustice? Are you tempted to take revenge on a person who is in a position of power over you? Honor the office, not the person, and entrust your way to the Lord. He will see you through, and He will make things right eventually. Everyone will have to give an answer to God for the decisions they make and the way they live their

lives, and eventually those who have abused their power will stand before a just God, and a time of reckoning will come.

Conclusion.

John Ortberg writes⁴ that sometimes it feels like there is no way out of the cave. But that's when you come to learn that God knows something about caves, because His own Son Jesus suffered like all of us and logged some time in one Himself.

Jesus, the Son of David, lost His position and His status as a rabbi. He lost his cousin John the Baptist, and all His friends deserted Him in His most critical hour of need. Not only that, He went to a cross and was crucified, and all His dreams appeared to die with Him. Then they put His body in a cave. But that was their big mistake. They forgot that God does some of His best work in caves. That's where resurrection takes place. The body of Jesus was in a cave for three days, but they couldn't keep Him there. He rose from the dead, and He's alive today!

I don't know what kind of cave you're in right now, but I do know God is there with you. And I also know that He can do His best work in your life even in that cave. When your dreams don't look like they will ever be fulfilled, when the deepest longings of your heart never get to see the light of day, and when you're treated unfairly at school, at home or at work, remember God is there with you. And you can take refuge in Him, just like David did. He will see you through, and He will make a way out of that cave sometime soon. You can count on it! Amen.

¹ Mark Twain, in *Innocents Abroad*, p. unknown.

² John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, p. 137. Some of the thoughts I share on the cave I adapted from the chapter "That Sinking Feeling" in Ortberg's book.

³ *Ibid*, p. 138.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 151.