

Leading By Following

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 23:1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

There's no question there's many things that you can learn in a classroom. But it's also true there are many things that can't be learned in a classroom. They can only be learned in the trenches of life. It's also true that some of the most profound, significant lessons in life can only be learned in the wilderness. That's what we want to continue to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 23. If you're visiting with us, we've been working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, and find ourselves in chapter 23 this morning. David is a fugitive; he's on the run. Saul is trying to kill him. We pick it up then in verse 1:

Then they told David, saying, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are plundering the threshing floors." So David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and deliver Keilah." But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the ranks of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the LORD once more. And the LORD answered him and said, "Arise, Go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand." So David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines; and he led away their livestock and struck them with a great slaughter. Then David delivered the inhabitants of Keilah. (*NASB, 1 Samuel 23:1-5)

So David and his men are hiding. Saul has slaughtered men, women and children in Nob. Somebody brings word to David that the Philistines have invaded the city of Keilah. Keilah was a border town about twelve miles east of Gath, so about halfway back to Bethlehem, about two or three miles from the caves of Adullam, so close to a place where David had hidden in the previous chapters. So word comes that they have raided the threshing floors. Typically a border town like this would have walls and fortified gates. It's a very dangerous place to live on the border, and so they would tend to live in very fortified cities, and that was true. But the threshing floor, by the very nature of what it was, had to be outside, flat ground, a place where the wind would blow—blow the chaff away, leave the grain. Basically then, that's where the food supply would be kept. So when it's talking about raiding the threshing floors, it's talking about taking all of their food. Of course in the ancient world you didn't just go to the grocery store and get more. You were in real trouble. So word comes to David and David's first response is to inquire of the Lord.

Now, in these Old Testament narratives we're given so little detail. There are so many things we don't know, and so many questions that we have and, at the end of the day, it's impossible to answer most of those questions. We just are guessing on those things. So one of the ways to kind of help understand the text is to really pay careful attention to what is actually said, because it gives you really helpful clues as to what the point of the story is. What is the point of the text here? So we want to make sure that we take note that nowhere in chapters 21 and 22, when David was on the run, did the text ever say, *David inquired of the Lord*. I think David was very sincere. I think he was a man after God's own heart; I think he's trying to do the right thing. But I also think David is confused. I think David is frightened. I think David is hurt. He's trying to figure this out. David is a warrior; he's courageous; he's a man of faith. And part of what's happening in chapters 21 and 22, very well intended, but he's just going about this on his own, and so he ends up in some very

difficult situations. He ends up in trouble in Gath, so he has to pretend to be a madman to get out of it. And then, as a result of his visit to Nob, men, women and children were slaughtered. At the end of chapter 22, he identifies that that was at least in part his fault. Had he never gone there, those people wouldn't have been slaughtered. So I think there is this sense in which he's realizing, because of who he is now as David, he needs to be much more careful, much more thoughtful about the decisions he makes. So now for the first time, the text says **David inquired of the Lord**, and I think that reflects something has changed. He's trying to better understand: What is God's part, what is my part, and how do we do this dance together?

The other thing that is very impressive when you stop and think about it, David is a fugitive. He's on the run; he's trying to survive in the wilderness. Saul has just slaughtered all these people back in Nob. He knows that. And so when word comes that the Philistines have attacked Keilah, if you're a fugitive fleeing for your life from King Saul, the likelihood that you would say, "Well, let's go attack the Philistines," would be probably pretty slight. I would think, *"I'm not the king; that's Saul's deal. I'm just trying to stay alive here!"* It's really quite remarkable that David thinks, *"I need to do something about that!"*

So you're left with the question, why? Why would he think that? I think for one: because he's a warrior, because that's how he's wired up. That's who he is. Those are his own people that are being killed by the Philistines and as a warrior, as a leader, the first thing he thinks is, *"Let's go rescue them!"*

I think the second part is: I think he genuinely cares about these people. While Saul is back slaughtering his own people in Nob, David as a fugitive, genuinely cares about his own people and wants to do something to help them. It's really a great insight into the heart of David and who he is as a leader.

So he inquires of the Lord, and the Lord says, "Yeah, go." So David informs his men, "Oh by the way, we're going to go pick a fight with the Philistines," and immediately his people respond, "We're afraid!" Now this isn't some elite army; these are kind of the misfits and the strugglers and the outcasts that have come to David, and he's trying to make them into some sort of a fighting force. But what they say is, "We're already afraid! Saul's trying to kill us. We're hiding; we're surviving. We're already afraid, and now you want to add, on top of that, picking a fight with the Philistines!"

Actually, that makes sense. I think that's what I would have said. David listens and he goes back and for the second time, he inquires of the Lord. And the Lord says, "Go." As a matter of fact, it's very specific. "I will deliver the Philistines into your hands." And so David convinces them. They go; they defeat the Philistines, and they deliver the city of Keilah. They rescue the city from the Philistines.

Now just stop and think about this. What does this say about David as a leader—that he was able to convince this kind of motley crew that had gathered around him that not only are they fleeing from Saul, and the army that wants to kill him, but they are going to go to Keilah, and they are going to attack the Philistines who were known for being a fighting machine? And yet these people so believe in David, they so trust David, they so believe in David's faith that they are willing to go with him and to engage in this battle. I think it speaks volumes for who David was as a man and as a leader, that these people would follow him into this battle.

It's interesting in verse five, all of the verbs are singular. So even though there were others in this battle, this is the David story, and so the verbs are singular. They are focusing specifically on David—and David led them to this great victory.

Now it came about, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, that he came down *with* an ephod in his hand. (Vs. 6)

That's what we would call an editorial comment, kind of comes from the outside. It isn't really advancing the story line, but it's telling you a detail you need to know. Those details given by an editorial comment are always critical to the story.

So what we're being told here is: This is how David is inquiring of the Lord. When all of the priests were slaughtered—eighty-five—there was one that escaped, and he made his way to David. He's now part of David's team, and he escaped with the ephod. The ephod was some sort of a plate. It could be carried separately. It could be attached to a garment. It had stones in it. And nobody quite understands how this thing worked, but you would ask yes/no questions, and somehow the priest could figure out from the ephod if God was saying yes or no.

I think it's more than just David now having his own personal priest. If you think back during the time of the judges, God spoke directly to the judges. They didn't need a priest for God to communicate with them. I think the priest in this story represents God sending the priest into David's midst to remind him on a daily basis: You have to ask God. You have to inquire of God. Before you just go do something, you need to talk to God; you need to ask God; you need to listen to God. It's kind of this discussion where, *"I know you're sincere; I know you're trying hard, but you've got to figure out what's God's part and what's your part. And you have to ask God and you have to listen to what He says."* So Abiathar basically represents that in the midst of David. Don't forget that. This is the lesson he needs to learn. Verse 7:

When it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah, Saul said, "God has delivered him into my hand, for he shut himself in by entering a city with double gates and bars." So Saul summoned all the people for war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men. Now David knew that Saul was plotting evil against him; so he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." Then David said, "O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has heard for certain that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down." Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will surrender you." Then David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit. David stayed in the wilderness in the strongholds, and remained in the hill country in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not deliver him into his hand. (Vs. 7-14)

So word comes to Saul that David is in Keilah. Saul thinks: *Now I have him!* It's very difficult to chase him around through the wilderness, but now he's made a tactical error. He is in a fortified, walled city, with only one entrance and exit. So all they have to do is get down there, block the exit, and they've got him. It's very interesting what Saul says. Saul says, **God has delivered him into my hand.** Now that raises an interesting question. Is Saul just posturing as if he's some

spiritual king that now is projecting God is doing this for me? Or does he actually believe this? I think the way the text is written is not about Saul posturing; it's more of Saul almost musing to himself, and actually thinking God has delivered David into his hands. It's a frightening thought that you can become so deceived, so self-deceived, so deluded, that you can be doing so much evil, hurting so many people as a leader, and in your own mind, you are somehow convinced God is on my side. It's a reflection of just how far gone Saul is. He's just so deluded and deceived and confused, that in his own mind, I think he actually thinks God is giving up David to him—and he says that.

The next thing, then, David hears that Saul is coming. He invites Abiathar to come, and he wants to again inquire of the Lord. Again you have to note how many times David inquires of the Lord, something that was missing in the previous chapters. So now he asks, and I think the key is noticing what he says. He's asking, "Is it true that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account?" Can you hear what he's asking there? He is feeling the weight of what happened in Nob. He realizes by going to Nob, men, women and children died—and he acknowledges that at the end of chapter 22—that that was on him, that it was his fault. He put them at risk by going there.

So now, with the best of intentions he has gone to Keilah; he has delivered this city; he has set them free. But now he wonders: Is Saul going to come to Keilah and slaughter all these people, and there will be another destroyed city on his conscience? That's actually what he's asking. Is that what's going to happen? He doesn't know what to do. He's asking God. So God responds, "Yes, Saul is coming," and basically affirms, "Yes, that is what Saul intends to do." So then the follow up question, "Will the people of Keilah turn me over to Saul?" And the answer is, "Yes."

Now I think sometimes we make these Old Testament figures like they're super human, or non-human; they're so spiritual these things don't bother them. This had to have been incredibly hurtful to David. David and his men risked their very lives. They delivered the city of Keilah. They were in trouble and David came to the rescue, and their way of saying thanks is they are going to betray David and turn him over to Saul. That has got to be deeply hurtful to David.

Maybe David thought, this being a fortified city, this could be a home base; this could be a place to hide; this could be a place to be safe for a while. I'm thinking he didn't expect this. It does raise an interesting question: Why would these people turn David over to Saul?

Do you think it's because they preferred Saul as king—because Saul was such a great king, because he had such a compelling vision for the nation, because he was so trustworthy? Because he was so courageous, because he was so kind and compassionate, because Saul was such a great king, they said, "We want Saul as king!" I don't think that's it at all. I think these people were absolutely terrified. I think the whole land quickly learned of the slaughter in Nob, and it sent a message that if you harbor this fugitive, this crazy, out-of-control king will slaughter the whole city. I think these people were absolutely terrified. They just wanted David out of their city.

This is just kind of the classic situation when you have a bad leader that has position and power. Lots of people get hurt. It is not uncommon in churches, out in the marketplace, in the athletic world, where you have people in positions of power, where they rule by terrifying everyone around them. And there is this sense that the people around them are deeply loyal, and you tend to think, "Boy, they must be a really good leader on the inside, because these people love them." But that isn't what's going on at all. These people are terrified that if you say one word, that if you step out of line in any way, this leader will crush you. It isn't about loyalty. It isn't about believing in the

leader. It is just terror of what this person might do if you cross him. And that's exactly what's happening with Saul. So these people are going to give up David. They don't want to be slaughtered. So David and his people leave. They hide here and there. The end of that paragraph tells us that Saul sought him **every day**. This is now Saul's obsession. Every day he's seeking to find David and put him to death. But it also says ...**but God did not deliver him into his hand.**

If you look at the language, it's basically identical to what Saul said. Saul said, "**God has delivered David into my hand.**" That's what Saul thinks. But the text is correcting that. God did not turn David over to Saul's hand. There is a reminder that God is in this—and He is protecting David every step of the way.

I think this represents a real low point for David. David trusts God. They defeat the Philistines. He may have had in his mind that this was the beginning of something new and something better—and then these people betray him. And this has just got to be a very difficult season for David, which is why what happens next is really quite remarkable.

Now David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God. Thus he said to him, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father will not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also." So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; and David stayed at Horesh while Jonathan went to his house. (Vs. 15-18)

In this moment in the wilderness that must have been such a low season for David, who shows up? None other than his best friend Jonathan. Somehow, some way, Jonathan finds him, and Jonathan is like this beautiful gift from God to encourage him in the wilderness. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what the text says, to **encourage him in God**. Jonathan is saying to him, "Hey, David, you have to have courage. You have to have faith. You need to believe God is in this. God is up to something." He tells him, "You don't need to be afraid. You will be king, and I'll be right there with you. Saul will not kill you." And then they re-upped this covenant that they had made together. Jonathan goes home; David goes on his way. It's this beautiful moment where, in this wilderness experience God sends this gift to encourage him, to remind him what's true, to remind him to be faithful, to re-energize David that God is up to something. Verse 19:

Then Ziphites came up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is David not hiding with us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is on the south of Jeshimon? Now then, O king, come down according to all the desire of your soul to do so; and our part *shall be* to surrender him into the king's hand." Saul said, "May you be blessed of the LORD, for you have had compassion on me. Go now, make more sure, and investigate and see his place where his haunt is, *and* who has seen him there; for I am told that he is very cunning. So look, and learn about all the hiding places where he hides himself and return to me with certainty, and I will go with you; and if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah." (Vs. 19-23)

One kind of side note, Psalm 54 was written out of this particular experience. So if you're trying to keep track of the different psalms that came out of the story, this paragraph would be the background for Psalm 54.

So David's hiding in the wilderness of Ziph, and Ziphites. (It's interesting it doesn't say "the Ziphites" which indicates it's not all of them, but some of them). Ziphites went to Saul and said, "Hey, David's hanging out in our wilderness and if you want him, we'll give him to you." Once again, are these people driven by a belief that Saul is the better king? Are they driven by a belief that Saul has a better vision for the nation? The answer is: Absolutely not. They are absolutely terrified. What appears to be loyalty isn't loyalty at all; it's just terror. They are all afraid that if any of us get caught harboring this guy, he will slaughter all of us. So they're willing to give up David just to make sure they don't pay the penalty from Saul.

Saul's response is classic: "May the Lord bless you." Why? **Because you have had compassion on me.** That word **compassion** could be translated *pity*. Poor, pitiful Saul! This really mean guy is out there causing all kinds of trouble, and he is stirring up all kinds of conflict in the kingdom. And now here's some Ziphites that come and they have compassion on poor Saul as the victim. And so Saul says, "The Lord bless you; you've had compassion on poor little me."

Again, it's just a painting of a picture of Saul and his mental state, and where he's at. I think he actually believes this. I think he believes he's a victim. This is not his fault. *Poor Saul!* And it's nice that some people finally see that. I think it's interesting too that when he tells them you need to go back and find out exactly where he's hiding and then we'll come get him, he says, "...because I've heard that this guy's very cunning." Kind of gives you the impression, "You know, I don't hardly even know the guy. I don't know why this mean guy is picking at me and making such a mess of my kingdom, but what I've heard is he's really cunning."

So let's review the story a little bit. Saul was there when David, as a shepherd boy, killed Goliath. Saul invited him into his presence to play music. Saul made him the general of his elite forces. Saul made him the commander of his forces. Saul made him the captain of the bodyguards. He was Saul's son-in-law. So he says, "You know, I've heard the guy's kind of cunning. I don't really know the guy, but he's really mean, and he's messing up my kingdom." Verse 24:

Then they arose and went to Ziph before Saul. Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon. When Saul and his men went to seek *him*, they told David, and he came down to the rock and stayed in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard *it*, he pursued David in the wilderness of Maon. Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain; and David was hurrying to get away from Saul, for Saul and his men were surrounding David and his men to seize them. But a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid on the land." So Saul returned from pursuing David and went to meet the Philistines; therefore they called that place the Rock of Escape. David went up from there and stayed in the strongholds of Engedi. (Vs. 24-29)

So David and his men are moving just a little bit south into more and more wilderness, and Saul is coming after them. One of the things again to emphasize: It's just hard for us to imagine this geography is so small. It's a wilderness; it's mountainous; it's rocky, but the actual distance is very small. So basically, if you take everything that happens in this chapter—so from Gibeah of Saul, all the way down to everything else that happens—it could all fit in Lancaster County. So we're not talking about going long distances. We're talking about like chess pieces being moved all over the board as David flees, and Saul chases, and they're moving around the hills and rocks with David trying to escape, Saul trying to find him.

So Saul comes down; David moves a little bit farther south. Basically Saul divides up his troops, goes around both sides of the mountain, and the text would indicate that David was trapped. You have this real sense of dread that Saul now has him trapped. He's closing in; David is done for, and just about the moment it seems like all hope is lost, a messenger comes. The Philistines have invaded Israel. Saul has to pull back his army and go fight the Philistines.

You kind of wonder if the Philistines didn't actually see Saul and the army go so far south, and sought that as their moment to invade the northern part of Israel. Whatever happened, Saul and the troops have to leave and no question, David and the people see this as God's deliverance. It's such a powerful lesson to them that they actually name the rock, the **Rock of Escape**. This was the place where we were trapped—no way out, but God made a way.

He goes down—David then ends up in Engedi, which is about ten miles north of Masada, just to the west of the Dead Sea. It's kind of an oasis. There's water; there's food—kind of a good place to hang out and we'll pick up the story there next week.

A couple of things to think about as we wrap this up this morning: I think it would be very easy if I was David to say, "This is just all so unfair!" And it is unfair! David is trying to do the right thing. He's been trying to do the right thing all along. He trusts God. God says, "Go," they defeat the Philistines; they set the city of Keilah free. They rescue the city, and in return the people are willing to betray him. So he flees. Saul is looking for him every single day. David finally ends up trapped. It seems like the end is there, and I could just see David thinking, "This is so unfair. It's confusing. I don't understand why it has to be this way."

On the other hand, if you look again at the story, the story is filled with reminders that God *is* there, and God *is* in it. And God *is* up to something. So God said, "Yes, take the Philistines!" That must have been a great faith-builder. They moved out of there no matter what Saul was doing. The text tells us God would not deliver David over to Saul's hands. At a time when David must have been so low and so discouraged and so fearful, who shows up but his best friend? This gift from God—this brother in their relationship with God—that says, "Hey, you need to remember that God is God, and God is in this, and Saul won't win. And you will be king, and you will be a great king! And I will be there with you. And Saul knows it, and God's going to get you through this. And then, when it looks like all hope is lost and they're trapped and this is the end, God delivers David once again.

So you see God's faithfulness every step of the way. What is very different about chapter 23 from chapters 21 and 22 is: David now seems much more in tune with God. He's inquiring of God. "What do you want me to do? What's the next step? Where do you want me to go?" David seems to be learning the lessons. He doesn't want to make the same mistakes again. He is trying to figure out: What is God's part, and what is my part? And how do we do this dance together? How can I learn to be a great leader by learning to be a great follower?

That's a huge part of what David needs to learn in the *Wilderness School of Leadership*. But that then raises another thought. What was effective for David in the school of leadership was that David actually changed to become the person God needed him to be—to be the greatest king in Israel. It is not enough to just survive the wilderness. You don't automatically grow and change just because you're in the wilderness. As a matter of fact, it's entirely possible to come out of your wilderness experience not changed at all. As a matter of fact, I would say it's entirely possible to come out in worse shape than when you went in. You can become angry; you can become bitter;

you can become fearful. You can play the victim. You come out of it in worse shape than when you went in. You're less useful to God now than you were before the wilderness.

It's more than just surviving the wilderness. We might say it like this: You have to actually graduate from God's *Wilderness School of Leadership*, and to graduate, you must pass the test. It's about brokenness. It's about humility. It's about surrender. It's about trying to understand where is God in all this, and what does it mean to follow God, and what is God's part, and what is my part, and how do we learn to do this dance together?

My part is not to be passive. My part is not just to sit back and let God do His thing. There's my part and there's God's part. And how do we do this together? A big part of what we need to learn in the *Wilderness School of Leadership* is: In order to be an effective spiritual leader, I have to learn to be a humble, broken, surrendered follower. I have to be a good follower if I'm going to be a faithful leader. And you only learn that lesson deeply in the wilderness.

Our Father, we are sobered again this morning at just this really difficult story—the pain, the struggle, the confusion. God, we know that You were preparing David for something really great that would affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. God, it's not always so clear when we're going through our own wilderness experience. God, may we be broken. May we be humble. May we be surrendered. God, as You mold us and shape us and change us, You teach us how to do this dance together, that You might be able to use us to do great things to change this world. Lord, that's our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Leading by Following

Courage to Lead Series

I Samuel 23:1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. There are many ways to learn in life. What are some ways you have received an education in life? For you, have the most important lessons been learned in a classroom or elsewhere?
2. Is it possible to spend time in the wilderness and not learn what God intended for you to learn? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Read I Samuel 23:1-14. What do you notice almost immediately that seems different about chapter 23 from chapters 21, 22? Why do you think that is?
2. Why would David take on the Philistines when he had enough trouble from Saul to worry about? What does this tell you about his heart as a leader?
3. What does it say about David as a leader that his men followed him into this fight that must have seemed totally unnecessary and even foolish?
4. How must David have felt when God confirmed that the people of Keilah would surrender him over to Saul after he had just risked his life to deliver them? Can you relate? Have you ever been betrayed like that? What did you do?
5. How does David's action in verses 9, 10 reflect the impact of what happened in Nob? What is he learning about his actions and choices now as a "high profile" leader?
6. Read I Samuel 23:15-18. In what way is Jonathan a gift from God? Have you had moments like this when you were in the wilderness?

7. Read I Samuel 23:19-29. Do think Saul was merely posturing in verses 7, 21 or is he so deceived and deluded that he actually thinks God is on his side? Have you known spiritual leaders who seem as clueless as Saul as to the hurt and destruction of their behaviors on others? Review who all has confronted Saul in some way for his bad leadership. How could he not get it?
8. Why do you think the people of Keilah and Ziph were so eager to turn David over to Saul? Was it because they loved having Saul as king? How have you seen similar behavior in our modern world? At work, church, home?

Application

1. What are all the things that seem unfair for David in this text? David is seeking to obey God but one thing after another seems unfair. What can we learn from this? Does obeying God mean everything is going to work out in our favor all the time?
2. List all the ways God took care of David in this text. In what ways have you seen God's care for you in the midst of the wilderness?
3. Being in the wilderness does not guarantee that we learn what God wants us to learn. How can we make sure we don't waste the wilderness experiences in our lives?