

6. Kept by the power of God

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn out of the scriptures and to our first reading this morning. We have two readings. Bob is continuing to preach in 1 Samuel. And first of all, if you'd like to turn to 1 Samuel chapter 23.

If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, I think it's page 246. 1 Samuel chapter 23. And we're going to read the second half of that chapter beginning at verse 15.

1 Samuel 23 at verse 15. And then we'll sing and then we'll read again into chapter 24.

Here's the ongoing story of David's travails at the hands of Saul. After Saul has had the kingdom forfeited prophetically by Samuel and given to David.

And here we see verse 15. David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. That's in the territory known as today's West Bank down towards the Dead Sea.

[1 : 06] Arid wilderness areas. Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh and strengthened his hand in God. And he said to him, Do not fear, for the hand of Saul, my father, shall not find you.

You shall be king over Israel and I shall be next to you. Saul, my father, also knows this. And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh and Jonathan went home. Then the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah saying, Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jerushimum? Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down.

And our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand. And Saul said, May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me. Go, make yet more sure.

Know and see the place where his foot is and who has seen him there, for it's told me that he's very cunning. See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides and come back to me with sure information.

[2 : 12] Then I'll go down with you. If he's in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah. There rose and went to Ziphah head of Saul. Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Ma'on and in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon.

Saul and his men went out to seek him and David was told. So he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Ma'on. And when Saul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Ma'on.

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. As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul saying, hurry and come for the Philistines have made a raid against the land.

So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. And therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape.

And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi. When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, behold, David is in the wilderness of En Gedi.

[3 : 22] Then Saul took three thousand men chosen out of all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the wild goats rocks. And he came to the sheepfolds, by the way, where there was a cave.

And Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave. And the men of David said to him, here is the day which the Lord has said to you, behold, I'll give your enemy into your hand and you shall do to him as it will seem good to you.

And David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe. Afterward, David's heart struck him because he cut off a corner of Saul's robe.

He said to his men, the Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my Lord, the Lord's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord's anointed. So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul.

Saul rose up and left the cave and went on his way. Afterward, David also arose and went out of the cave and called after Saul, my Lord, the king. And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage.

[4 : 40] And David said to Saul, why do you listen to the words of men who say, behold, David seeks your harm? Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you today into my hand in the cave.

And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, I will not put out my hand against my Lord, for he is the Lord's anointed. See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand.

For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and didn't kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I've not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it.

May the Lord judge between me and you. May the Lord avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancient says, out of the wickedness comes wickedness. But my hand shall not be against you. After whom is the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog? After a flea? May the Lord therefore be judge and give sentence between me and you.

[5 : 49] And see to it and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand. As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, Is this your voice, my son David?

And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, You are more righteous than I. For you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. You have declared this day how you have dealt well with me and that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands.

For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the Lord reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. And I behold, I know that you shall surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand.

Swear to me therefore by the Lord that you will not cut off my offspring after me. And that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house. And Saul swore this, and David swore this to Saul.

And then Saul went home. But David and his men went up to the stronghold. Amen. May God bless to us this his word.

[6 : 58] What makes a good story? Now the 19th century novelist Wilkie Collins said the ingredients of a good story were threefold. Make them cry.

In other words, stir up their emotions. Make them laugh. Spill through their sense of humor. And make them wait. In other words, a story with suspense in it and nail-biting situations and various crises.

Now in many ways, these stories of David, and not least this one, illustrate all these things. There are unexpected twists. At the beginning, David and Jonathan meet, and meet for the last time.

There's unbearable suspense, particularly chapter 23, verse 26. Saul went on one side of the mountain, David and his men on the other side of the mountain, and David was hurrying to get away from Saul.

Then there's another twist. David saved by the Philistines, by the old enemy. And then there's the great reversal in chapter 24, which is not without its touches of humor, as we'll see, where Saul is in the power of David.

[8 : 08] It is a gripping story with all these ingredients. And of course, instantly you say, so what? It's a good story, a gripping story. How is that going to help us?

What is that God going to say to us through this? What is God saying through this story of his flawed and faithful servant, David?

I want to suggest the clue lies in the repeated use of the word hand. Verse 14 of the last verse we looked at last week, Saul sought David every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

In that word is repeated. Verse 16, Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David and strengthened his hand in God. And various other parts, verse 20, Saul's hand.

Come down and surrender into the king's hand. Then 24, 10 to 11 and 15. Now, the word hand, the hand of God in the Bible means the power of God, sometimes the arm of God, sometimes even the finger of God.

[9 : 18] But it's a more personal word. It suggests not some kind of impersonal mover behind the scenes. It suggests the personal God intervening in the story.

So linking these episodes together is the hand of the Lord, which is behind the hand of David and opposed by the hand of Saul.

Now, I've said often, and I'll say it again, we are not David, but we have David's God. And therefore, this story I'm going to call kept by the power of God, kept by the hand of God.

What kind of a God do we believe in? We believe in a God who is able to keep us from falling, a God who holds us in his hand.

This story shows us the hand of God at work in the business of life. Now, being kept by the power of God does not mean kept free from troubles, from difficulties, from all kinds of tragedies, all kinds of problems that loom large.

[10 : 27] But it does mean that within these, his hand is his power, is keeping us, upholding us, and will eventually bring us to glory. So let's look at the story in that light then, kept by the power of God.

And what does it mean to be kept by the power of God? Well, the first thing the hand of God, the power of God does, is to give David personal encouragement. That's the first part of the story, 23 verses 15 to 18.

David must have been distressed. David must have felt this trouble is never going to end. Indeed, later on he's going to say, one day I will perish at the hand of Saul. Very same word again.

And it's been a very long time since his anointing in chapter 16. And everything that's happened, apart from the spectacular victory of Goliath, seems to be pointing in the opposite direction.

He's in the desert, and his life is a desert. And in these circumstances, God sends to him personal encouragement. But that's characteristic of God.

[11 : 37] That's not just something for David. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7, verse 6, God who comforts the downcast comforted me by the coming of Titus.

Notice that phrase, a general statement about God. God who comforts the downcast comforted me, and in his case, by the coming of Titus. So what does it mean to receive encouragement from God?

Well, God does it in two ways. First of all, there is the coming of Jonathan to David here. Jonathan, Saul's son, verse 16, rose and went to David at Horesh and strengthened his hand in God.

Now, the deep and unselfish friendship of David and Jonathan has been one of the bright threads in this dark story. This is a poignant meeting. This is to be the last meeting on earth of these two friends.

Later on, we are going to read and look at David's poignant and moving and beautiful lament on Saul, and particularly on Jonathan. These men were good friends.

[12 : 44] Real friends, I mean. Not simply those who are friendly with you because you can give them something, or because your friendship will be some advantage to them. But people who commit themselves to you.

And such friends are precious gifts of God. If you have such friends, thank God for them. This is one of the ways in which God encourages. That's only one of the ways.

There's another way. God doesn't just encourage David by the coming of Jonathan, but by the words of Jonathan. See, verse 17 is a reaffirming, an underlining of the promise that God had made to David through Samuel.

Do not fear the hand of Saul. Once again, the phrase, the hand of Saul. My father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you.

So you may say, I don't have friends like Jonathan. Or maybe even when I was in a problem, my friends didn't help. But here, notice what Jonathan says.

[13 : 46] Jonathan strengthened his hand in God. We're reminded that even when Jonathan went, the encouragement remained.

This is what Paul, once again, was to say at the end of his life in 2 Timothy. At my first defense, no one stood with me. All deserted me. But the Lord stood by me.

If we don't have friends like that, or we can't find them in times of difficulty, the Lord stands by us. What a friend we have in Jesus, as we sang, Do your friends, the spies, forsake you?

Take it to the Lord in prayer. So it's the first thing of the hand of God, the power of God, brings David personal encouragement. All of us need that encouragement.

And of course, all of us need to be that kind of encourager when we can. Because the Christian life is tough. The Christian life is difficult.

[14 : 50] The life of faith is hard. People need the pat on the shoulder, the arm around the shoulder. People need someone to sit down and listen to them, perhaps just allow them to weep.

People need that. And God graciously provides it. But even if that's not possible, God's word, God's presence, God's love surrounds us.

So that's the first thing. Now the second thing, in the second part of the chapter, 23, 19 to 29, is the power of God is shown in his providential care.

Not just in his personal encouragement, but in his providential care. Now providence is not simply a high-sounding theological word. It's one of these words that can easily be bandied about.

Providence is about the mysterious way God provides for his people. Sometimes so ordinary as to be unnoticed, and sometimes spectacular.

[15 : 48] And in this story, we have a very fine illustration of how God provides for his people. It's an unpleasant story in many ways.

Verse 19, the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah saying, Is not David hiding among us? A terrifying story of ingratiation and betrayal.

A mixture of human weakness and cowardliness and real danger. Now the Ziphites clearly wanted to ingratiate themselves with Saul, and Saul greets this with false piety.

Notice where Saul said, verse 21, May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have compassion on me. As we'll see later on, false piety comes easily to Saul.

Saul is the kind of man who uses the language of piety in order to cover up his real feelings. And then, in verse 26, we have the nail-biting tension I mentioned already.

[16 : 47] Saul on one side, David on the other. David's caught now, a pincer movement. There's no getting away from it. And then the totally unexpected Philistine raid, which turns the tables.

Once again, David flees to, flees as he had done before to Gath to the Philistines, and they prove his unlikely rescuers. Now, a lot of these could be seen as coincidences.

The Bible doesn't believe in coincidences. The Bible believes in providence, the providential care of God. And the providence of God is wider than we can possibly imagine.

Look at the sparrows in your garden. Not one of these falls to the ground without your father. And as Jesus said, you are more value than many sparrows.

Providence is totally detailed in its care. The very hairs of our head are numbered. I know that's an easier job for the Almighty with some of us than with others.

[17 : 44] Nevertheless, it shows how detailed the providence of God, the care of God, is for his people. Now, I want you to notice two things here. First of all, God's providential care overrules all the machinations of people.

Here it overrules cowardliness and treachery. Now, the Ziphites at very best were crawlers trying to ingratiate themselves with Saul. That's the very best thing you could say about them.

At worst, they were treacherous scoundrels who wanted to get rid of David. Our destiny in matters large and small is never ultimately in the hand of other people.

I think that's important to remember. That's why David says at one point, let me fall into the hands of the Lord and not into the hands of men. So, God's providential care overrules all the cowardliness, the weakness, even the good intentions of human beings.

God works his purpose out using all these things but never being bound by them. And the providence of God, secondly, keeps us in real danger.

[18 : 56] The nail-biting suspense. Look again at 26 and 27. Saul went on one side of the mountain, David and his men on the other side of the mountain. David was hurrying to get away from Saul.

Saul and Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them. Now, we can read this as a lucky escape.

It is one way to read it if we're simply reading it as a story. We can also rejoice in the Lord's providence. Come, people of the risen king who'd have liked to give him praise. We're going to sing that later on.

And that hymn expresses, once again, the providence of God. Now, that's why if we read this story simply as the story of David, that we're going to find it a good story but nothing much else.

That's why many people run away from the Old Testament. They say, there's a story here but what else is there? Well, what there is is great teaching about God, about the hand of God.

[19 : 59] Your hand, O God, has guided your flock from age to age. We sang that a couple of weeks ago. And that hymn is true, not just of David. That truth is true, not just of David.

It's true of us. Well, thank God for his providential care, for his personal encouragements. You don't need to use the word providence. Dorothy Sayers in one of our plays tells of a minister who went to visit an old lady who was going through trouble sometimes and he said something like this, so we have to accept what providence gives us.

The old lady says, I've never heard of providence but there is one above that will make providence mind his ways if he gets too much above himself. Now, there was an old lady who didn't understand the word providence but she understood the reality of providence.

The reality of providence is that God cares. God cares every moment. God cares at all times and in all places. But that does not mean that all times and all places are easy and straightforward.

Now, the third thing and this is particularly chapter 24 is God's hand gives us prospects for the future. Now, you may look at this story and say, well nurse, this has got to do with the future.

[21 : 18] Well, first of all, it's got to do with David's future. This is a story about the future of the Lord's anointed. This is a story about how David is going to become king, about how the promises are going to be fulfilled and how Saul is going to be at the end rejected.

Now, that's not on the surface of the story but when we dig deeper into the story, that's what it's saying. We can see in this story why Saul's character and behavior has caused him to be rejected. What we read in this story about Saul shows us in effect God made the right choice. God didn't get it wrong. Saul wasn't a kindly individual who had been turned down and God ought to have given him another chance and we can see why David is God's future king for all his flaws.

Remember, I've called this whole series David, God's flawed but faithful servant. Now, we cannot choose but be flawed but we can choose whether or not to be faithful.

Now, first of all, let's look at Saul. Saul here is really cut down to size. Human pretentiousness is punctured here. Saul, we are told, went in to relieve himself in the cave.

[22 : 42] Chapter 24, verse 3. That makes him seem an awful lot less terrifying, an awful lot less formidable, doesn't it? How the Bible punctures human pretentiousness as the powerful struck and fret there are upon the stage.

And we're shown Saul here in a totally undignified position. The Bible is out to puncture human pomposity, human self-satisfaction because as long as human beings think of themselves and other human beings as people to be cringed before, as people to be frightened at, then of course that's going to fill our world.

Our world is going to be dominated by terrifying human beings rather than by the living God. And so, and of course the irony here that David and his men, verse 4, were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave.

You can imagine, I mean, a wonderful film this would make, a wonderful story, but behind the outward events is the hand of God. And notice, and Saul here is cut down to size, he's reduced to, he's just an ordinary human being, doing what ordinary human beings need to do.

Nothing formidable about that. And the irony, as I say, of David hiding here. And then in verses 16 to 21, notice what he says. As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, is this your voice, my son David?

[24 : 20] And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. Eugene Peterson, whose fine paraphrase of the scripture, the message, some of you will know, wrote a very fine, very brief commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, which is one of the more helpful commentaries on these books.

And Eugene Peterson talks here about Saul's sentimentalized spirituality. We've seen this already. Characteristic of Saul, he talks the language of piety.

Brothers and sisters, don't talk the language of piety. Talk like human beings. Talk like ordinary people. Otherwise, people are going to be put off. There is nothing more off-putting than a kind of super-spirituality.

And Saul is like that. No longer believing in the living God, no longer following the living God, he still talks the language of piety, the language of religion.

And yet, he is speaking here wiser than he knows. Now behold, verse 20, I know that you'll be surely king. The kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand.

[25 : 34] Swear, verse 21, Swear to me therefore by the Lord, you will not cut off my offspring after me. You will not destroy my name out of my father's house. See what, under the language of piety, he is doing.

He's thinking David as a man like himself. The minute I'm gone, David will take it out on my family. That shows Saul is not fit to be king. He judges everyone by his own low standards, dressed up in the language of piety.

But, he knows nothing whatever about the deep affection of his son Jonathan for David. He knows about the friendship, but being the kind of man he is, he probably assumes that Jonathan and David are scheming together for their own ends rather than to see the Lord's word established.

And later on in 2 Samuel, much later, David says, Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?

The word kindness there is the great covenant word, Heseth, steadfast love, the kind of forgiving, unconditional love that God himself pours out.

[26 : 46] We can see how Saul knows nothing about that. Saul has had a fright and because he's had a fright, he wants to get out of it. Last week, compared him to Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardened his heart.

Pharaoh had a fright, he hardened his heart, so Saul does here. See what I mean by saying the hand of God gives us the prospect, the glimpses of the future. The hand of Saul is opposing the hand of David, which means he's opposing the hand of God.

Let's look at how David emerges here. David is the Lord's anointed. Notice how he behaves. His followers, first of all, can't believe, can't believe the luck in chapter 24, verse 4.

The men of David said to him, here is the day of which the Lord has said to you, behold, I will give your enemy into your hand and you shall do to him as seems good to you.

This is the day. They know providence when they see it or so they think. And they think, here's a great opportunity, our enemy has fallen into our hands, let's just get rid of him once and for all.

[28 : 04] And David actually feels guilty. He's even gone so far as cutting off the hem of Saul's robe and has to restrain his men forcefully. Verse 7, David persuaded his men with these words.

Persuade is a very weak translation. David literally tore them up with his words. Rather like what we say, tearing a strip off someone. David was furious with his men.

David refused to take advantage of this situation. Reminding us of the magnetism of David.

Reminding us of his qualities as a leader. David, of course, must have wondered, is this God's providence giving my enemy into my hand or is it a temptation?

For David's men, it was clear this is providence. For David, he realized when the kingdom comes, it must come in God's time and in God's way.

And we flash forward, don't we, to David's greater son faced with a similar situation. The devil says, all the kingdoms of this world I will give to you.

[29 : 14] Now, of course, they belong to the Lord Jesus Christ anyway, but the redemption of the world depended on taking the way of the cross. And here for David, the dark path, the tragedies have to continue.

And the key to David's attitude here is in verse 10. Behold this day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you today into my hand in the cave.

And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, I will not put out my hand against my Lord, for he is the Lord's anointed. David's destiny, David's, the future of David, the future of the Lord's anointed, was in his hands.

And David was the one who indeed had no wrong or treason in his heart. Verse 15, may the Lord therefore judge and give sense between me and you and see and plead my cause and deliver me from his hand.

See, the Lord is going to have the last word. And David shows himself as God's man here because he is willing to wait God's time. That doesn't mean that David is naive.

[30 : 30] Look at verse 22. David swore this to Saul when Saul asked him not to destroy his offspring. As we can see, he keeps this. Then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

Notice what this shows about how much David trusts Saul. Saul went to his home. David went to the stronghold. David isn't naive. He will not put his head into the lion's mouth.

He will not go into the lion's den because he doesn't trust Saul. He's quite right not to trust Saul because we'll see in chapters 26 and 27 almost the same situation arises again.

So, you can see the picture of the Lord's anointed emerging here. He trusts in the promises of God and the providence of God.

He will not force the issue. He won't use his hand when God's hand has not been stretched out. At the same time, he's not naive. As Cromwell famously said, trust in God and keep your powder dry.

[31 : 36] David is keeping his powder dry because he does not trust Saul. As I've said, Saul shows he is not capable of being the Lord's anointed. Many people read these stories.

Many liberal commentators in particular read these stories and say they are pro-David. They are pro-David propaganda. The argument is that David's spin doctors have written up the story of David and downgraded and denigrated Saul and his kingdom.

Now, apart from anything else, if they read on to 2 Samuel 11 and 12 the story of David Uriah and Bathsheba, that certainly wasn't written by David's spin doctors.

But apart from anything else, they're not reading the story. They're not seeing how it's not a case that God has said, Saul, I don't like you. I'm going to reject you. It's a case that Saul has deliberately set himself against God.

I mentioned before, Saul is a chilling example of that terrifying word in Romans 1. God gave them over. God gives Saul over, not because Saul is a sinner, not because Saul is flawed, because David is also a sinner and flawed, but because Saul has set his face against the kingdom.

[32 : 58] And David, with all his faults, with all his flaws, is God's man. We are not David. But, from these incidents, we need to rejoice in our personal encouragements.

When God sends us people like Jonathan, when God gives us the encouragement of his word, let's praise him for it. And let's also be that kind of person to others.

We rejoice in his providential care. Never mind about the word. These are the little unnoticed blessings that God gives us day by day, and week by week, and year by year.

But above all, this story is asking whose side we are on. Are we like Saul, those who have tasted of the grace of God, tasted of the world to come, as Hebrews says, and turned our back against it?

Or are we those like David, who in spite of our flaws and weaknesses, in spite of the tangled lives we live, are living in the light of his presence, trusting in his promises, and believing that being kept by the power of God does not just mean personal encouragement, it does not mean simply providential help, it means that that hand will eventually bring us to glory.

[34 : 23] That is the gospel, the consistent gospel in Old and New Testaments, kept by the power of God. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. God our Father, we recognize the great temptation to be like Saul, to take things into our own hands, to go our own way, and ultimately to face rejection.

Help us instead to rely on your keeping power and to keep ourselves in the love of God, because that power is at work in us.

and so bless us and guide us and may your hand not only guide us in this life, but guide us to glory. Amen.