

Betrayal

On March 15, 44 B.C., a conspiracy to murder Julius Caesar was carried out. Over sixty senators had become part of the conspiracy, for they felt that Caesar had now replaced the Republic of Rome with a kingdom, controlled by a king. When the assassins approached Caesar, at first he resisted them. But then he saw among them someone very close to him, Marcus Brutus. He had treated Brutus like a son and been very close to him. When Caesar saw that Brutus was one of the assassins, he stopped resisting. He instead, took part of his toga, pulled it over his head, and then gave himself up to his murderers. He was stabbed 23 times. Caesar could fight his enemies, but when he saw he was betrayed by his loved ones, he gave up fighting altogether.

Few experiences in life will wound us as deeply as betrayal. Betrayal is far worse than rejection. When people reject us, they make a decision to refuse us: to refuse to befriend us, or work with us, or be with us. That kind of rejection happens before ties are formed. Betrayal, on the other hand, is an act of malice from someone who has claimed to be our friend, our compatriot, our associate, our family. Betrayal is often called a stab in the back, because our back is unprotected. We face our enemies, but stand side-by-side with our friends and family, with our back exposed, and the last thing we expect is that someone standing with us and supposedly who stands behind us and supports us will actually attack us, stab us in the back.

But betrayal is an ugly part of the human condition, and few are the people who have never experienced betrayal.

Actually, betrayal and treachery is at the heart of the whole story of humanity. For in the Garden of Eden, mankind betrayed God, turning from God's side to that of God's enemy, rejecting God's Word, and seeking independence. Throughout Scripture, the story is the failure and treachery of people, even God's people against God, contrasted with His loyalty and steadfast love.

In fact, it happened in the very first brothers. Cain betrayed Abel, by acting as if they were just going out into the field, and then slaying his brother. Jacob betrayed Esau, in robbing of his birthright, and Laban betrayed Jacob, by robbing him of Rachel. Joseph's brothers betrayed Joseph by selling him into slavery. Delilah will betray Samson. Ahab and Jezebel will betray Naboth.

Betrayal is all over the life of David.

David has already experienced betrayal by Saul. And, in fact, he has also experienced it with his wife Michal. We see in this chapter that Jonathan managed to find David, and so if she had wanted to, she could have joined her husband. But evidently, she wanted the luxuries of living as a princess, not keeping her covenant with David, and soon she will actually adulterously marry someone else.

During David's reign, he will experience betrayal several times. His son Amnon will betray him. His son Absalom will also betray him, kill Amnon and seek the throne. One of his trusted men, Joab, will betray his trust and murder others. And all of this will take place after David himself betrays one of his best men, Uriah the Hittite.

Learning to not betray and be loyal is one of the marks of being truly born again. Learning to respond rightly to betrayal is one of the marks of Christlikeness. Indeed, what could be worse than the betrayal of Jesus by one of his closest friends, a man he had mentored, loved, and even offered the choice piece of the meal as a token of friendship? The name of Judas is now forever associated with betrayal. But how Jesus responded to betrayal, and the fact that he has never betrayed anyone is our mark to follow.

Here in chapter 23, David will experience betrayal twice, one cowardly, the other calculated. He will be betrayed by his own tribesmen, people of Judah, who hailed him as a hero just a short while ago, but are now willing to side with Saul if it is in their self-interest. And then sandwiched in the middle will be a picture of loyalty, a picture of Christ, of how God remains faithful. Let's look into the mirror of Scripture with David as the background.

I. The Cowardly Betrayal At Keilah

1 Samuel 23:1 Then they told David, saying, "Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and they are robbing the threshing floors."

David is in a forest with his men. In the last chapter, David came back from Moab and began hiding in the forest of Hereth. This is a forest about 5 kilometres from the caves of Adullam, fairly close to Bethlehem. David hears of a Philistine attack on Keilah, just to the west.

Keilah was apparently something of a properly fortified town, with walls, gates and fortifications. The ruins of this city have actually been found: it sits on a dome shaped hill, and covers about 12 acres. Of course, the fields and threshing floors were outside the walls, and the Philistines were waging a kind of guerilla warfare on this town.

David is not like Saul. He has a king's heart, with a sense of responsibility for others, a feeling of duty to protect others. David has to make a decision. He is an outlaw, and trying to protect his own life, and that of his men. Should he emerge from hiding to protect others, especially his own tribesmen from Judah? Or should he leave Saul to fight the Philistines and stay in hiding? David asks the Lord for direction.

2 Therefore 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 save Keilah."

We'll see in a moment how David is getting such clear answers from the Lord. But notice that David is now becoming a leader deeply concerned with doing the Lord's will. He is willing to defend other people, but he is no longer being rash or impulsive or willing to lie and deceive. Saul apparently is unconcerned about Philistine attacks on his people.

But David's men are not exactly ready. They are fugitives trying to avoid danger, not run to it. Now they will face battle, and exposure to the hunt of Saul. They are risking a lot for these inhabitants of Keilah, really sticking out their necks for them.

3 But David's men said to him, "Look, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?"

So, to make absolutely sure, David asks the Lord again, and this time the Lord not only confirms the command, but tells David and his men of the outcome.

4 Then David inquired of the LORD once again. And the LORD answered him and said, "Arise, go down to Keilah. For I will deliver the Philistines into your hand."

Here is a king in the making. He wants to defend and protect his people, but he wants to do so by God's will, not impulsively. And when his men are unsure, he does not shame them or harangue them, but points them to God's Word, God's promises. His men are content to follow a man who follows God.

How is David getting this kind of clear direction from God? Verse 6 explains.

6 Now it happened, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, *that* he went down *with* an ephod in his hand.

Since Abiathar arrived in the last chapter, this is probably a flashback verse, explaining that Abiathar had come down with the ephod. This is how David is getting the clear answers we see in verses 2 and 4.

The ephod was the special linen robe worn by the High Priest. Attached to it was a breastplate that the High Priest wore. It not only had twelve stones for each of the Twelve Tribes, but it also contained a place to hold the Urim and the Thummim. We don't know exactly what these were. The words *Urim* and *Thummim* mean *lights* and *perfection*. Some think they were simply two sticks, or perhaps stones, maybe even a multitude of stones with Hebrew letters on them. Very likely they were two precious stones.

Whatever they were, they were used by the priests on special occasions to discern God's will, usually with a simple yes or no answer. They may have functioned like the lot, with one coming up over another. Some ancient Jewish writers claim that one of them would light up, when the High Priest enquired of Yahveh using a Yes/No question.

So David receives confirmation that he should defend the city of Keilah.

5 And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines, struck them with a mighty blow, and took away their livestock. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah.

But after destroying the Philistines, David would have gone inside the city and his men would have received food and lodging. They are not in the forests and caves anymore, but probably some actual beds in actual houses.

So will David get a reward? A presidential pardon from Saul? No. Even though David has done the people of Keilah a good turn, and even though David is serving the nation of Israel, that doesn't mean it will change Saul's attitude. When an ungodly man has it in for you, it doesn't matter what you do. He will interpret your actions according to his own grid.

7 And Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah. So Saul said, "God has delivered him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars." 8 Then Saul called all the people together for war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.

Saul sees this and imagines it is a wonderful providence that has now trapped David inside a fortified city. He believes he can surprise and catch David within the walls of the town. Notice Saul believes he is doing God's will as well. But just thinking you are doesn't mean you are. Between these two kings, we know which one murdered the high priest, and which one is protecting the new high priest, we know who is rightly interpreting the will of God. Saul gathers Israel's men for war, to lay siege to one of their own cities.

David hears of this, and once again consults the Lord.

9 When David knew that Saul plotted evil against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." 10 Then David said, "O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. 11 "Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down." 12 Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will deliver *you*."

Once again, using the ephod, David asks the Lord if Saul will actually besiege this city, and if so, will this city of Judah, containing his own tribesmen whom he has just saved, betray him? Will they hand him over to Saul to save their own skin, or will they stand with him and protect him as he protected them?

Remember, one of the complicating factors is that all of Israel has just heard what Saul did to a whole town of priests when he thought they were siding with David. If Saul will annihilate a town of priests, what will he do to a regular town of farmers? These people are stuck between loyalty to their fellow Judean David, who just protected and blessed them like the king should be doing, or the current king Saul who will harm them if they don't obey his tyrannical will.

Sadly, they will land where most people land: fearful self-interest. As Luther said, the general truth about people is this: few are strong, and many are weak. When push comes to shove, people betray. This sounds harsh, but when it comes to the race of Adam, betrayal is the norm. Loyalty is unusual. Treachery is natural. Faithfulness is supernatural.

The Lord tells David that Saul will come, and Keilah will betray him.

By the way, for those of you interested in questions of God's foreknowledge and the future and God's sovereignty, it is interesting that God here tells David about an alternative future, what is called a contingent or possible future. If David stays, God knows with certainty that Keilah will hand him over, even though that future never actually comes to pass. God not only knows the actual future, but also the possible future. God sees possible worlds, while knowing fully which world He will bring to pass.

We could pause and ask how David might have responded to the city of Keilah, once he knew this was the case. They had not betrayed him yet, but the Lord had shown David that they certainly would. David could have taken pre-emptive revenge on them. He could have begun to preach to them about their spineless and self-centred ways. But he didn't. He knew that most people are fearful and self-interested, only the very few are brave and selfless. Whether it is marriage, or business, or politics, or sadly even church membership: apart from grace, loyalty is the exception, not the norm.

13 So David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah and went wherever they could go. Then it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah; so he halted the expedition. 14 And David stayed in strongholds in the wilderness, and remained in the mountains in the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but God did not deliver him into his hand. 15 So David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. And David was in the Wilderness of Ziph in a forest.

David scatters his men, and they then rendezvous further to the south, using caves and forests as cover and hideouts. The location is in the tribal territory of Judah, about five miles southeast of Hebron and about ten miles southeast of Keilah, where David has just fought the Philistines. Here David will stay and move about. Saul temporarily gives up on hunting David.

From this dreary scene of betrayal and human weakness, the chapter is interrupted with the unusual, the unexpected, the exception.

II. The Covenant Loyalty of Jonathan

16 Then Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David in the woods and strengthened his hand in God.
17 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. Even my father Saul knows that." 18 So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD. And David stayed in the woods, and Jonathan went to his own house.

As a brief interlude, Jonathan arrives to encourage David. After bad news, there is finally good news. Jonathan is there as an encourager, reminding David of God's promises, of the certain future.

This act of loyalty by Jonathan is in the narrative as a direct contrast to the betrayal which David experiences from everyone else. Jonathan, who has the most to lose by befriending David, remains true and loyal. He risks his life to get to David, simply to encourage him. Here he makes it as plain as he ever had: he knows David will be king. Jonathan hopes to be David's second, but sadly that won't be what comes to pass.

And in contrast to the Judeans who are happy to receive protection, but not give it, Jonathan renews the covenant with David.

Think what this is like. Truly, there is only one who makes a covenant with us and never breaks it. We can and should hope that our marriage covenants will be permanent and unbroken. We can hope that our church membership covenants will be unbroken. We can hope that our oaths to country will hold true, that our contracts made in business will be upheld. But in truth, not all of them will weather the years that well.

But there is one who does make a covenant with people.

9 "Therefore know that the LORD your God, He *is* God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; (Deut. 7:9)

"O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; (1 Ki. 8:23)

The great story of the Bible is that Satan encouraged us to join him. But once we took of the fruit, we realised he had betrayed us, and brought us into a slavery of death. So God has made covenants with man: with Abraham, with Israel through Moses, with David, and then with all who will come to Him in the New Covenant. God promises us: I will forgive your sins, I will give you a future, I will deliver you from punishment and death and despair, if you will turn to me, and trust my provisions, and not lean on your own works, and your own understanding. Receive my Anointed One, and I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Change your loyalties from the world to Me, God says, and I will remain faithful to you forever. There is only one with the character and power and truthfulness to never turn against us on a whim, and that is God.

13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. (2 Tim. 2:13)

Jonathan's good news is really like the gospel. Surrounded by betrayals, there is the good news of a faithful, loyal Saviour, if you will enter into covenant with Him.

But now, the narrative returns to the grim reality of more betrayal. From the cowardly betrayal at Keilah, we now

III. The Calculated Betrayal at Ziph

19 Then the Ziphites came up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is David not hiding with us in strongholds in the woods, in the hill of Hachilah, which *is* on the south of Jeshimon? 20 "Now therefore, O king, come down according to all the desire of your soul to come down; and our part *shall be* to deliver him into the king's hand."

Now Keilah wasn't the only town in Judah that was happy to betray David. The town closest to the wilderness of Ziph, Ziph itself, was also anxious to ingratiate themselves with Saul. In fact, they sent people all the way up north to Saul's capital city, Gibeah, to tell Saul that David was in their area, in the forest Horesh.

So Saul asks them to do some scouting for him, find out everywhere David hides so that he can close the net on him.

21 And Saul said, "Blessed *are* you of the LORD, for you have compassion on me. 22 "Please go and find out for sure, and see the place where his hideout is, *and* who has seen him there. For I am told he is very crafty. 23 "See therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking places where he hides; and come back to me with certainty, and I will go with you. And it shall be, if he is in the land, that I will search for him throughout all the clans of Judah."

This is not just the scared betrayal of the people in Keilah, this is a calculated betrayal. This is the person who schemes to stab you in the back, who smiles at you, even while planning to betray you.

7 For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, But his heart is not with you. (Prov. 23:7)

David feels the sting of this betrayal in Psalm 55:

12 For *it is* not an enemy *who* reproaches me; Then I could bear *it*. Nor *is it* one *who* hates me who has exalted *himself* against me; Then I could hide from him. 13 But *it was* you, a man my equal, My companion and my acquaintance. 14 We took sweet counsel together, *And* walked to the house of God in the throng. (Ps. 55:12-14)

What follows is a cat-and-mouse game of David continually on the move from caves and dens to woods and forests.

24 So they arose and went to Ziph before Saul. But David and his men *were* in the Wilderness of Maon, in the plain on the south of Jeshimon. 25 When Saul and his men went to seek *him*, they told David. Therefore he went down to the rock, and stayed in the Wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard *that*, he pursued David in the Wilderness of Maon. 26 Then Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain. So David made haste to get away from Saul, for Saul and his men were encircling David and his men to take them.

It seems what Saul did was divide his army and sent half around one side of the mountain and half around the other side, in a kind of pincer movement that would have meant total defeat for David and his 600 soldiers.

Just when it seems as if David is caught, God provides another providential escape.

27 But a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hasten and come, for the Philistines have invaded the land!" 28 Therefore Saul returned from pursuing David, and went against the Philistines; so they called that place the Rock of Escape. 29 Then David went up from there and dwelt in strongholds at En Gedi. (1 Sam. 23:1-29)

When David hears of this, he writes **Psalm 54:1** <To the Chief Musician. With stringed instruments. A Contemplation of David when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, "Is David not hiding with us?"> Save me, O

God, by Your name, And vindicate me by Your strength. 2 Hear my prayer, O God; Give ear to the words of my mouth. 3 For strangers have risen up against me, And oppressors have sought after my life; They have not set God before them. Selah 4 Behold, God *is* my helper; The Lord *is* with those who uphold my life. 5 He will repay my enemies for their evil. Cut them off in Your truth. 6 I will freely sacrifice to You; I will praise Your name, O LORD, for *it is* good. 7 For He has delivered me out of all trouble; And my eye has seen *its desire* upon my enemies. (Ps. 54:1-7)

What is the Christlike response to betrayal? He prays. He prays for deliverance and for vindication. He expresses trust both that God will deliver him, and bring justice. And then, in verse 6, he returns to praise. He does not fret or murmur. He does not allow the root of bitterness to bore down into his soul. He does not nurse his resentment. He does not take on a cynical, jaded view of people. He prays, he trusts, he praises.

Why didn't David become a bitter man, filled with revenge and guarded self-protectiveness? What will prevent you from becoming bitter about that betrayal in marriage, in business, in ministry, in church?

Because David learnt very early: there is only one person who will never fail you, disappoint you or betray you, and it is Yahweh-God. He is the true covenant-maker and covenant-keeper. To be loved by Him frees you to risk loving others, knowing they will fail.

If you are in Christ, then you have found the One who will never leave you, nor forsake you. To be loved by God is to find your heart's contentment in perfect loyalty, and then to seek to be that to spouse, to family, to local church, to neighbour.

If you are in Christ, you can offer the best part of the meal to a Judas, even though you know he will betray you, and betray you with a kiss. And you can forgive, as you have been forgiven, and come back to saying, I will praise your name, O Yahveh, for it is good.