

## Repetition

Have you ever used one of these sayings: “Here we go again” “We've been here before.” “Feels like deja vu” “We've been round this block before”. “The plane keeps circling”. “Same tune, 500<sup>th</sup> stanza”. All of these sayings point to something we know: sometimes life seems to repeat itself. Situations, or problems seem to repeat. Sometimes the same trial, or dilemma, or financial problem, or marriage struggle seems to repeat in different forms again and again. Often enough, we ask something like, why does this situation keep repeating? Why don't we move on to something different? Why is it the same thing, month after month, year after year?

The Bible has some of the answers, and it has to do with why God repeats things.

In fact, that's what we're looking at in chapter 26 of 1 Samuel. So much in this account is similar to what happened in chapter 24. Saul is hunting David with 3000 men, David finds Saul in a vulnerable position, David's men tell him to strike, and David refuses to kill the Lord's anointed. David confronts Saul with the fact that he has spared him, and Saul weeps and promises to be kind to David.

These similarities have caused some sceptics to claim that these are just earlier and later versions of the same story, added by an editor at a later time. But that's ridiculous, for several reasons. As similar as the stories are, there are probably more differences. One is in a cave in En-gedi, this is in a camp in Hachilah. First Samuel 24 takes place during the day; this takes place at night. In the previous account, Saul comes into a cave, in this account he is asleep and David comes to him. In the one, David cuts off part of his robe, in this one he takes Saul's spear. In the first, David spoke only to Saul, because he was alone; here he speaks to Saul and Abner. They're clearly different accounts, and different events, but there's no doubt they are similar. They naturally remind us of the other. The fact that they are so similar makes us ask, why? Why does God Word seem to contain repetitions or very similar accounts?

There's a lot of that in the Bible.

Deuteronomy repeats the laws of Exodus and Leviticus.

Chronicles is repeating matters from Samuel and Kings. Psalms 53 repeats Psalm 14. Psalms 105:1-15 is the same as 1 Chronicles 16:8-22; Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22; near duplication between Isaiah 37 and 2 Kings 19.

Parts of Ezra are identical in Nehemiah. Parts of Jeremiah are found in 2 Kings. Parts of Isaiah are in Micah.

Many Proverbs are given twice. The Gospels are nearly identical in some sections—over 600 of Mark's 661 verses are found in Matthew and Luke combined. Jude and 2 Peter overlap.

Scripture has no problem saying the same thing twice. Why would God do this? God has no problem saying the same thing twice (or more), for the same reasons He has no problem putting us through the same trials twice, or several times. God repeats himself and repeats lessons because for good or bad, we are creatures of habit, formed and shaped by repetition.

That works in good and bad ways, depending on how you respond. Respond wrongly, and you entrench a bad habit, and make it harder to remember righteousness, and easier to sin next time, and less sensitive to the Spirit. Respond rightly, and you strengthen a good habit, make it easier to resist temptation next time around, make it more likely to remember truth next time.

But all of this means that we seldom face a particular trial or test or temptation just once. We face it repeatedly, so that we can learn to respond rightly.

If you've ever wondered why some trials seem to repeat, why some problems seem to persist, why some situations don't seem to change, part of the answer has to do with God's purposes in repetition and reminder. In this account, we'll see David experience a very similar trial and test to what he experienced in chapter 24. Some of the lessons are the same. But the fact that it occurs a second time means the major lesson is about the power of repetition. In this account, we'll see a second chance to resist sin, a second chance to repeat obedience, and a second chance to repent.

## **I. A Second Chance to Resist Sin**

**1 Samuel 26:1** Now the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is David not hiding in the hill of Hachilah, opposite Jeshimon?" **2** Then Saul arose and went down to the Wilderness of Ziph, having three thousand chosen men of Israel with him, to seek David in the Wilderness of Ziph. **3** And Saul encamped in the hill of Hachilah, which is opposite Jeshimon, by the road. But David stayed in the wilderness, and he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness.

Amazingly those same Ziphites who betrayed him back in chapter 23 are at it again. They send a delegation all the way north to Saul's palace to tell him that they have seen David in their area. Here is a repeat performance of betrayal. It is amazing that when David is on the throne, not once does he seek out revenge upon these people who sided with his enemy.

Saul again takes three thousand men, and makes camp in a place called Hachilah. But this time, David has the element of surprise. He knows Saul is coming.

**4** David therefore sent out spies, and understood that Saul had indeed come. **5** So David arose and came to the place where Saul had encamped. And David saw the place where Saul lay, and Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army. Now Saul lay within the camp, with the people encamped all around him.

**6** Then David answered, and said to Ahimelech the Hittite and to Abishai the son of Zeruiah, brother of Joab, saying, "Who will go down with me to Saul in the camp?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you."

**7** So David and Abishai came to the people by night; and there Saul lay sleeping within the camp, with his spear stuck in the ground by his head. And Abner and the people lay all around him. **8** Then Abishai said to David, "God has delivered your enemy into your hand this day. Now therefore, please, let me strike him at once with the spear, right to the earth; and I will not *have to strike* him a second time!"

Once David finds out where Saul is, he decides to make an approach at night. Clearly, David has grown in boldness since the last encounter with Saul. He is not hiding in caves.

From their vantage point, David can see the whole camp, and see that Saul is in the very middle, with all the men camped around him as protection. He is able to see that Saul's place is next to Abner's, the general of the army. Abner was actually Saul's uncle, the one who had been with Saul at the battle with Goliath. He often sat at Saul's table.

David then asks two men who will volunteer to go with him. One is Ahimelech the Hittite, who is mentioned only here, and the other is Abishai. Abishai volunteers. Abishai is actually David's nephew, the son of his sister Zeruiah.

Apparently, the Lord had cast these men into a deep sleep. v12: For they *were* all asleep, because a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen on them. David and Abishai navigate their way through hundreds of sleeping men without arousing suspicion from those who are awake – you'd expect to see some men getting up to change guards or fetch water or for ablutions. Two men could have made their way in the dark of a few campfires. But Saul and Abner are asleep and unguarded.

Pegged into the ground is Saul's spear: the spear he cast at David twice, the spear he cast at Jonathan, the spear he held when he tried to shame and guilt his fellow Benjamites. This is his weapon of choice, the symbol of his kingship.

Now Abishai says to David very similar words to the ones David's men had whispered into his ear in the cave: "This is it! The man hunting for your life has been handed to you on a platter! He is asleep, and his own spear is next to him, ready to be used. The only thing missing is a sign on the spear with an arrow pointing down at Saul and the words "please kill me".

And now, perhaps remembering David's unwillingness the last time, and remembering what David has just recently learned about vengeance with Nabal, Abishai offers to be the executioner. "You don't have to do it, I will. I will strike him down with his own spear, and unlike him, I won't miss twice, I'll get him!"

David is receiving the same temptation again. He has a second chance to resist the same opportunity to take vengeance, and reject authority, and elevate himself. Here is his enemy being served on a platter. It will be so easy.

Temptation resisted once is just the start. Temptation resisted once but surrendered to most of the time doesn't add up to obedience. If you resist the temptation to anger once, but give in to it nine times, we can say that nine out of ten times, you're an angry person. If you resist pornography on two days out of seven and give in on the other days, we would say that you are mostly giving in to the temptation.

One of the lies that Satan tells us in the midst of temptation is that it will never go away, and that the only way to relieve it is to give in to it. But in fact, each time you resist, it makes the next time that bit easier to resist.

A repeated temptation tests what is becoming permanent in our lives, of what is now characterising us, shaping our whole characters. Repeated temptations reveal not just actions on one day, but character as a whole, what we are inclined to, our whole disposition, our affections, our loves.

Had David resisted the temptation to strike on one day, but given in on this day, we would not say that David had become patient, meek and trusting to God's justice, submissive to authority. But David's response to this shows whether his obedience was momentary and exceptional, or whether it has become normative.

## II. A Second Chance to Repeat Obedience

9 And David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD'S anointed, and be guiltless?" 10 David said furthermore, "As the LORD lives, the LORD shall strike him, or his day shall come to die, or he shall go out to battle and perish. 11 "The LORD forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. But please, take now the spear and the jug of water that *are* by his head, and let us go." 12 So David took the spear and the jug of water *by* Saul's head, and they got away; and no man saw *it* or knew *it* or awoke. For they *were* all asleep, because a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen on them.

Back in chapter 24, David had said, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he *is* the anointed of the LORD." (1 Sam. 24:6)

David now takes this second opportunity to submit, to obey. David reminds Abishai, and himself,

that you need to salute the uniform. Saul is God's chosen one, and it is up to God to remove Him, through age, or war, or some other means. But it is not up to David to commit regicide, murder of the king. It is not for David to avenge himself.

Instead, David wants some evidence that he has been here: Saul's spear, and the jug of water. And then, perhaps because he didn't quite trust Abishai with that spear, he takes them himself.

David's response shows what a growing Christian does at the point of temptation: He repeats the truth to himself. He repeats what he knows. When Jesus was tempted, He repeated back to Satan, and to Himself, the very words of Scripture. He quoted truth, and the truth reminded Him of what to do in the situation. Sometimes Satan will whisper in your ear that it is boring to do the same thing, to do your duty, to keep responding right.

When you are placed in the same trial, you don't need to do something new every time. But if you know what the right response is, you need to repeat the truth to yourself. The same right response. The same godly attitude. The same refusal to give in to the flesh. You know it, you remember it, you quote it, and you do it.

Now when you do that, you are doing two things.

First, you are entrenching a holy habit, building endurance into your obedience. You are cementing the right response until such time that it becomes part of you. Like riding a bicycle, driving a car, swimming, walking, skating. At first, we had to think hard and concentrate on doing these things. But once we did them enough, they became habitual, and we could do them without thinking, and even begin to do other things at the same time. If you keep repeating obedience, it becomes part of you, and it is no longer the conscious struggle it once was.

Second, you are preventing forgetfulness. The Bible frequently talks about the great error of forgetting the truth, forgetting God, forgetting what he requires. In our family, when someone forgets something necessary, we don't accept that as an excuse. We say, "You always remember what is important to you. The things you care about are not the sort of things that just slip out of your head." When we forget what God requires, it really isn't an excuse. It's just a sign of indifference to God's Word, that leads to neglect and forgetfulness.

In fact, Peter tells us that he does not feel bad to remind us of things. <sup>12</sup> For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. <sup>13</sup> Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding *you*,... <sup>15</sup> Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease. (2 Pet. 1:12-15 )

Second chances to obey entrench the habits of obedience, and strengthen our memory of what is right.

Well, these second chances were not only David's second chances. By sparing Saul a second time, it was also Saul who had a second chance.

### **III. A Second Chance to Repent**

<sup>13</sup> Now David went over to the other side, and stood on the top of a hill afar off, a great distance *being* between them. <sup>14</sup> And David called out to the people and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Do you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner answered and said, "Who *are* you, calling out to the king?" <sup>15</sup> So David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? And who *is* like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy your lord the king. <sup>16</sup> "This thing that you have done *is* not

good. As the LORD lives, you deserve to die, because you have not guarded your master, the LORD'S anointed. And now see where the king's spear *is*, and the jug of water that *was* by his head."

Once they are a far enough distance off, where these 3000 couldn't suddenly get to them, they begin calling out, waking up the whole camp. David addresses Abner, and presents the spear and the jug as proof of the Abner's negligence. Abner has not protected the king, and the king could have been killed, which means Abner should really lose his life as a penalty.

At this point, Saul begins speaking.

17 Then Saul knew David's voice, and said, "*Is* that your voice, my son David?" And David said, "*It is* my voice, my lord, O king." 18 And he said, "Why does my lord thus pursue his servant? For what have I done, or what evil *is* in my hand? 19 "Now therefore, please, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant: If the LORD has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering. But if *it is* the children of men, *may* they *be* cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out this day from sharing in the inheritance of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 "So now, do not let my blood fall to the earth before the face of the LORD. For the king of Israel has come out to seek a flea, as when one hunts a partridge in the mountains."

Again, we have Saul's volatile and unpredictable character, now addressing David with tenderness, "David, my son". Of course, David is not his son anymore, he has given his daughter Michal to another man. And David does not call Saul, "my father" any longer, but continues to salute the uniform and call him "my lord" three times, and the king also three times.

For a second time, David confronts Saul with the injustice and inappropriateness of this hunt for David. It is unjust because David has done no evil, no crime punishable by the laws of Moses. It is inappropriate because David says he is like a flea, insignificant, harmless to the king.

David says that if the Lord has incited Saul to do this, then David will present the necessary sacrifice. But if it is men who are whispering in Saul's ear, then David invokes a curse upon them, because this pursuit is keeping David from settling in Israel, from attending the Tabernacle worship. David is being forced to even consider living with foreigners, which will mean he will be amongst foreign gods.

Now here comes Saul's response, which sounds a lot like what he had said in chapter 24.

21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David. For I will harm you no more, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Indeed I have played the fool and erred exceedingly."

25 Then Saul said to David, "*May* you *be* blessed, my son David! You shall both do great things and also still prevail." (1 Sam. 26:1-25)

Saul sounds repentant. He says "I have sinned". He says "I have played the fool". He tells David that he will prevail, and even blesses David. He makes a promise to stop harming David, and even invites David to return.

Is this genuine? No, because David understands that Saul doesn't repent. He just gets caught, feels regret, and says the right things at the time. Like Pharaoh:

Then Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "I have sinned this time; the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones. "Make supplication to the LORD, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail; and I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.'" (Exodus 9:27-28)

"Then Pharaoh hurriedly called for Moses and Aaron, and he said, "I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you. "Now therefore, please forgive my sin only this once, and make supplication to the LORD your God, that He would only remove this death from me.'" (Exodus 10:16-17)

Saul has already said "I have sinned" before.

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. ... Then he said, "I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the LORD your God." (1 Samuel 15:24,30)

You *are* more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil. (1 Sam. 24:17)

Saul has another opportunity to repent, but every opportunity he gets is only condemning him more, because he does not truly turn away from his sin. He feels momentary guilt, momentary shame, a bit of regret. But it is not a heart change. Once he is back in this throne room, and the moment has passed, he'll start feeling the same jealousy, the same insecurity, and he will begin hunting David all over again.

Here is the negative side of repeat situations. If it is obvious what we should do, and we do not do it, it actually hardens our heart. We learn to resist the voice of the Spirit a little more, and learn to justify our own sin a little more. Next time round, we feel less guilt. Do this enough times and the conscience begins to be seared, calloused, the nerve endings no longer sensitive to the touch of the Spirit.

David knows that Saul's repentance is skin deep, and in the next chapter, he actually leaves Israelite territory.

22 And David answered and said, "Here is the king's spear. Let one of the young men come over and get it. 23 "May the LORD repay every man *for* his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD delivered you into *my* hand today, but I would not stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. 24 "And indeed, as your life was valued much this day in my eyes, so let my life be valued much in the eyes of the LORD, and let Him deliver me out of all tribulation."

David knows who he is dealing with. He is not going to walk into that camp. He asks for one of Saul's men to come over and get the spear. And then he again calls out for justice. He asks that as much as he honoured and valued Saul's life, so God should honour and value his life.

David has learned to whom vengeance belongs. He has learned to act wisely in all his ways. He has learned to forgive betrayal and unfairness. He has learned to salute the uniform and not avenge himself. And he has learned it under repeated provocations.

David faces the same temptation again, and chooses to remind himself of truth, resist temptation and respond rightly. Saul faces the same temptation again and chooses to experience remorse and regret, but there is no heart change, no inward turning.

At some point, you will find God giving you the same exam, again. At some point, you will face the same temptations you thought you'd recently conquered. You can either waste the repetition, or use it to grow.