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*“Guided, Guarded, and Used”*

*1 SAMUEL 23:1-14*

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## At A Glance

In 1 Samuel 23:1–14, David shows us a different way to lead and live. Before he moves, he inquires of the Lord—and God guides him, guards him, and uses him to rescue others. This passage reminds us that usefulness in God’s kingdom doesn’t begin with strength or strategy, but with humble dependence on the Lord.

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## Act Now, Pray Later

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to make decisions first and pray later? We say we trust the Lord. We say we depend on Him. But when pressure comes — when something urgent or threatening or exciting shows up — we move fast and pray slow. We act. We react. We strategize. And only afterward do we ask, “Lord, would You bless this?”

That’s often how we live and lead. But 1 Samuel 23 shows us a different way to live and a different kind of leader. David is no longer the impulsive, self-reliant man we saw hiding in Philistine territory or scrambling in the cave of Adullam. Something has changed. Three different times in this passage we read the same phrase: **“David inquired of the LORD.”**

Before he rescues — he asks. Before he leads — he asks. Before he escapes — he asks. As a result, God used him to save people. This passage teaches us a simple but life-shaping truth: God uses people who truly depend upon Him. Let’s walk through this story and watch what happens when a man learns to truly rely on the Lord.

## Why Save Keilah?

**Verses 1-2 Now they told David, “Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore David inquired of the LORD, “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?” And the LORD said to David, “Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah.”**

What was significant about Keilah? Why protect them? Keilah was in the land of Judah, David’s tribal people. But beyond tribal loyalty, this demonstrates a covenantal king’s devotion to his people. His instinct to inquire of the Lord shows us something had clicked in his heart and mind from chapter 21. He was a leader walking with the Lord.

And now that David had humbled himself before the Lord, cared for his family, sought His guidance, and owned his failures, he was postured to be used.

## Sensitivity to God and Man

**Verse 3 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 armies of the Philistines?”**

This isn't surprising. This was life and death. Moving into more open country and going to war effectively on two fronts did not seem to be divinely inspired wisdom. What David did next further distinguished him from Saul.

**Verse 4 Then David inquired of the LORD again. And the LORD answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand."**

Rather than ruling his men by force as Saul had done earlier (cf. 1 Sam. 14:24), David, being the compassionate and reasonable leader that he was, and valuing the input of his men, went back to the Lord for confirmation. How important that David be sure he was following the Lord before he led his men into battle!

**Verse 5 And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah.**

A victory for Keilah and a victory for David's leadership! David's actions in this critical situation reveals his sensitivity to both God and his men.

But that's not the end of the story, as a single victory rarely is. There was a much more protracted battle with Saul still ahead. Would the God who led David to rescue Keilah keep and protect David from Saul?

[All Access Pass](#)

**Verse 6 When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand.**

An **ephod** was a linen garment worn by the priests. It was the divinely approved means of inquiring of the Lord. Saul had 85 priests who wore the linen ephod slaughtered. But one man, along with an ephod, escaped Saul and ended up

with David. Now David had continual access to inquire of the Lord – an all access pass.

**Verses 7-8 Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, "God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars."<sup>8</sup> And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men.**

The story shifts back to **Saul**, who in contrast to David, does not have the Lord's presence, the Lord's guidance, or the Lord's blessing. Showing his true paranoid colors, Saul was willing to go to war against his own people in Keilah as verse 10 indicates.

**Verse 9 David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here."**

David is a quick learner. He had learned not to act on his own instinct.

**Verses 10-12 Then David said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. <sup>11</sup>Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down."<sup>12</sup> 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."**

Now we know why the ephod was mentioned in **verse 6**. David's inquiry is two-fold: will Saul attack Keilah and will Keilah cave to that pressure and deliver David? God answers in the affirmative to both.

David had his answer and knew what was necessary to protect the inhabitants of Keilah. David was clearly sensitive to the risk his presence there placed upon them.

### A True Leader of Israel

**Verses 13-14 Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. <sup>14</sup>And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.**

David was becoming a true leader of Israel. He had inherited an army, which grew to 600 in short order. He had a prophet (Gad) a priest (Abiathar) and an ephod to inquire of the Lord. The Lord was amassing to David the symbols of kingship and used David's actions to deliver His people.

This episode in David's life highlights a few significant things to us:

First it reveals David's reliance upon the Lord. David, a proven military leader, refused to engage in military operations without consulting the Lord. This episode both opened and closed with David's statement, **Oh, Lord, God of Israel**. David submitted to the Lord as the true sovereign.

Second, it shows how the Lord used David's strategic maneuvering to protect his people.

Third, it underscores the significance of David's access to the Lord through the priest and ephod.

Granted, we are not the covenantal king of Israel, the history of redemption does not ride on our shoulders, and we're not living in the old covenant. However, there are a few things we can apply from this episode to our lives.

### David got right before he got used.

Now that David had humbled himself before the Lord, cared for his family, sought the Lord's guidance, and owned his failures, he was postured to be used by the Lord to save others.

Think about the order – David got right with God in humility, right with family in prioritizing their needs, right with those he hurt by owning his failures, and then he was able to rescue others.

It is tempting to get this totally backwards. It is tempting to bend over backwards to save others while neglecting our own families and without humbling ourselves or owning our sin.

I've seen it in pastors whose wives call the church a "mistress." I've seen it in volunteers who pour themselves into ministry while their spouse and children get left-overs. I've seen it in counselors who hide their own addictions.

They exhaust themselves trying to save others while their personal lives are in shambles. It's not right. It doesn't honor the Lord.

Does the Lord want to you use you to rescue people out of the grips of hell? Absolutely! Does He want to use you to rescue people out of their sin? Yes! Does He want to use you to rescue people from hardship and suffering? Undoubtedly.

These, and lots more, are good works prepared beforehand for you. He wants to use you. But not before you get right with Him.

It is noble to have a heart to help others, but your first obligation is to the Lord and to your own family. You can't truly help others while refusing to deal with your own sin. And it's not right to neglect your family to serve other people.

So, first humble yourself before the Lord and own your failures. From there get things right at home. Then go be used to help others.

That's what we see with David. And I think it's the heart behind Paul's advocating for singleness – because when you get married and have children, your family takes priority even over ministry. Get right with the Lord, then get used by Him to rescue others.

David's strongholds were redeemed when they were submitted.

Trusting the Lord, David took shelter where God told him to take shelter. And he took sensible precautions. He was no longer hiding out in the strongholds of Adullam in his flesh. But neither was he sitting in the middle of a valley expecting a miracle.

**Verse 14** concludes, **David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness...And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.**

Notice three things: David took strategic action. The danger remained. God protected. Let's explore this.

David was a military leader and a strategist. He used what God gave him to protect himself and his men. He sheltered in strongholds. He moved from place to place. Very evasive!

In Adullam, David seemed driven by fear and self-reliance. Here in Ziph, we see something different — a man repeatedly seeking the Lord. Similar practical means – hiding in strongholds – but with completely different effects.

I see a principle for us. We find security in our jobs, education, homes, cars, beauty, social circles. These are not inherently wrong. When we rely upon the Lord, He often uses these means to protect and provide for us. It's when we rely upon these *rather* than God that they become like the cave of Adullam.

If we are able, we ought to provide for ourselves. This means we ought to have a job and we ought to steward our money responsibly. Further, we ought to take reasonable steps toward an education that moves us into an occupation that utilizes our strengths and personalities.

We also ought to surround ourselves with godly friends and a good church for mutual companionship and practical help.

We ought to take care of our bodies with healthy diets, exercise, and medical care. These are all sensible, strategic safeties, or **strongholds**. In and of themselves, these are good and appropriate.

It is when these things become our source of hope that we have problems. It is when we pursue these so we don't *need* to rely upon God, or at the expense of reliance upon God, that we find ourselves in the pit with David. As with everything, it's a matter of the heart.

But remember that even in these strongholds there is no guarantee of safety. Saul kept pursuing David daily and it is only because God did not give him into Saul's hands that he evaded. This must always be on our minds: *"If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* James 4:15

All your provision and plans mean nothing apart from the Lord's sovereign purposes. So, make your plans. Work heartily as for the Lord. Eat well. Exercise. Take your doctor's advice. Cherish good friends. Join a church in meaningful membership.

These are good strongholds in the wilderness of life; strongholds the Lord uses to protect and provide. But submit them to the Lord and your strongholds will be redeemed!

When I first read through this story, I got a little jealous of David. David asked & God answered. David had a priest beside him with a means of communicating directly with the Lord. I thought to myself, 'Wouldn't that be nice to have access to God whenever you want?!'

Then I realized:

David had a priest, we have a greater one.

Church, we have a greater priest on our side. Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us we have a great high priest who knows exactly what we're going through and invites us to draw near to Him in our time of need. It never bothers Him when we approach because "...*he always lives to make intercession...*"  
*Hebrews 7:25*

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit who dwells in us intercedes for us. "*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*" Romans 8:26-27

David had a priest, a man with an ephod. We have Christ and His Spirit dwells within us! David, were he not in the very presence of God right now, would be jealous of us!

Furthermore, we have the revealed will of God in the canon of scripture. "*And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,*" 2 Peter 1:19

Do you feel like you are walking in darkness? Can't you join David in saying, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*" Psalm 119:105 You are not meant to wander around in darkness wondering what God would have you to do. He is not far from you. He has placed His Spirit within you, He has given you His Word to guide you, and He invites you to seek Him.

Brother and sister, we have far more than David! We have not only a priest, we have the Great High Priest, the very Spirit of God living in us interceding for us before the throne of God, and we have His very Word.

### Guided, Guarded, and Used

So, press in to what the Lord offers you! You have a purpose to fulfill, a mind to think, and access to the very throne room of God! He invites you to rely totally upon Him and to get busy doing the work He prepared beforehand for you to do. Much of it will be just doing what you know to do and trusting Him with the results.

What made the difference in David's life? It wasn't better soldiers. It wasn't better strategy. It wasn't even better circumstances. Saul still hunted him. Nothing got easier. But David changed.

He stopped trusting his instincts. He stopped scrambling in fear. And he learned to inquire of the Lord. And because he relied on God: God guided him. God protected him. God used him.

Church, the same invitation stands before us. Get right with the Lord first. Order your home rightly. Use the means God gives you wisely.

Trust Him with the results. Because God delights to guide and guard those who rely on Him. And when we live that way, like David, God just might use us to rescue others for His glory.