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*“Strength In The Wilderness”*

*1 SAMUEL 23:15-29*

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## AT A GLANCE

In 1 Samuel 23:15–29, David is hunted, surrounded, betrayed, and nearly captured. Yet in the wilderness, God provides unexpected oases—through a faithful friend, steadfast promises, and providential refuge. This sermon explores how Jonathan strengthened David in the Lord, how God’s promises anchored him in present danger, and how the Lord delivered him to the “Rock of Escape.” Ultimately, the passage points to Jesus—the greater Friend, the true Promise, and our everlasting Refuge in every wilderness.

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## STRENGTH IN THE LORD

In today’s passage, David is hunted, surrounded, betrayed, and nearly captured. Yet in the wilderness, God provides unexpected oases—first through a faithful friend, then through steadfast promises, and finally through providential refuge. This passage shows how God strengthens His servants not by removing us from danger, but by anchoring us in truth. In the desert of fear and betrayal, David discovers that strength in the Lord comes from true friendship, true promises, and true refuge.

### READ 1 SAMUEL 23:23

**“See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah.”**

### JONATHAN’S TRIP TO DAVID

**Verses 15-16 David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. <sup>16</sup>And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God.**

Jonathan got up from the comfort and safety of the royal estate and trekked down to David to be with him in one of his darkest hours. The ministry of presence!

But he didn’t ask the Lord to take away the threat or give him a pep-talk. He didn’t downplay the seriousness or engage in superficial platitudes. He **strengthened his hand in God**. Let’s read how he did that.

**Verses 17-18 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.” <sup>18</sup>And the two of them made a covenant before the LORD. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.**

Jonathan reminded David of what was true. He pointed David back to the Lord. This wasn’t a coup. It was divine promise. Even Saul knew this. Sometimes it’s helpful for someone else to come in and

say the truth out loud. Jonathan just reminded David what he already knew – God had made him king over Israel.

Tragically, the part about Jonathan sitting next to David never happened. This was likely the last time David would ever see him. No further meetings are recorded.

### BETRAYED BY HIS OWN PEOPLE

**Verses 19-20 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 Jeshimon? <sup>20</sup> 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.”**

David was not always universally loved or accepted. But he was God’s anointed, whether Saul, or the people of Ziph liked it or not. These aren’t Edomites or Philistines or Amalekites. These are David’s kinsmen, of the tribe of Judah, of the people of Israel that have betrayed him. Betrayal stings, but it cuts deep when it’s family or close friends.

Psalm 54 is set in this context, with these words spoken verbatim in the heading. In the very middle of the psalm, verse 4, David proclaims that God is his helper, the upholder of his life.

### FUTURE HINDSIGHT

David speaks in the present battle with what I like to call *future hindsight*. He’s in the fight, he’s saying that ruthless men seek, not sought, his life. He’s facing the reality that his life is still in jeopardy. But listen to verse 7, “*For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*” *Psalm 54:7*

Because David has been strengthened in the Lord by Jonathan; because he has been reminded of God’s faithfulness before, he can say in verse 6, “*With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*” *Psalm 54:6*

David chose to worship in the present and he knew he would worship without fear in the future, not because he was confident in himself. Not because he was confident in his army. But because his mind and heart had been turned back to the goodness of God. That’s future hindsight. That’s what it means to be strengthened in the Lord.

**Verse 21 And Saul said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, for you have had compassion on me.** As if Saul was in a place to bless people in the Lord. He was willing to slaughter his own people and now he’s blessing them for betraying the rightful heir to the throne. Nothing about this situation was **blessed by the Lord.**

**Verses 22-23** reveal yet another deficiency of Saul’s; yet another reminder that Saul was a man without the Lord. David sought the Lord and heard from him with great assurance.

Saul had men come directly to him and he had to send them back to make sure. He was supposedly the guy in charge of Israel but his inadequacy was showing.

### HURRYING TO GET AWAY

**Verses 24-28 And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul. Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon. <sup>25</sup> And Saul and his men went to seek him. And David was told, so he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon. <sup>26</sup> 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,**

Saul is one side of the mountain; David the other. The word translated mountain here can also be translated hill. You shouldn't imagine the Rockies. We're talking an obstacle easily traversed on horse and foot.

**David was hurrying to get away from Saul.** Here we're reminded of the seriousness of the threat. David is practically within Saul's grasp. David was tipped off and now Saul is encircling him on two sides. So is this it? Is this the end?!

Before we move on and get our answer, I'd like to point out something that highlights David's character here. The narrator says David went **down**. That suggests he was on high ground in the wilderness of Maon. As a Combat Engineer it was my job to help the Infantry unit I was attached to develop an engagement area.

When you're in the defense you get to decide where the fight's going to take place. You always take the high ground. You always make your enemy fight up hill. You pick the terrain that gives you the best advantage.

David apparently held the high ground but he fled to lower ground, risking his own life. Why?

We'll see it clearly next week. But spoiler alert, David wanted nothing to do with King Saul's death. Even if it meant being exposed and taking his chances on the low ground, David was bent on getting away, not getting even. He trusted God. And for good reason.

### PROVIDENTIAL DELIVERANCE

**Verses 27-28 a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land." 28 So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape.**

Remember when David told the Moabite king, "Until I know what the Lord will do for me"? (1 Samuel 22:3) I said that represented a humble trust in the Lord. He put his life in the Lord's hands.

Well, here's one thing God did for him. He moved the Philistines, who had been routed by David at Keilah, to attack elsewhere in the land. Providence!

What was first called **the rock** in verse 25 is now being called by its redeemed name **the Rock of Escape**. The literal name *slippery rock* seems fitting since this is the place David gave Saul the slip.

**Verse 29 And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi.**

**Engedi** is considered an oasis in the wilderness with a plentiful freshwater spring. In the middle of the desert, God delivered David into a literal oasis – fresh water, shelter, and safety.

Three things I see in this episode of David's life in the wilderness: the oasis of true friendship, true promises, and true refuge.

### STRENGTHENED BY AN OASIS OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP

I think this is what it means to be a good friend - to come alongside someone and strengthen them in the Lord. To immerse your friend or loved one in the truth of Christ & the love of Christ, so that in the wilderness they may be filled with the strength of Christ.

This was Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3. Paul prayed that they would be strengthened in their inner being...that they would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:14-19)

I think true friends help us understand our trials for what they are – opportunities to trust in God's goodness and reflect His goodness to others.

Jonathan played a part in turning David to the Lord. Then he left and went home. Naturally, his very presence would have encouraged David immensely. But it is not the presence of the friend that has

lasting power. I don't mean to undervalue the benefit of physical presence. There's a reason we call it the *ministry of presence*. It is deeply meaningful when someone is walking through a wilderness.

But it was the presence of God that David needed most, not Jonathan. Personal presence is good, but it has limitations. If you really want to help people, show up, give them Jesus, and go home in the confidence that while you cannot be with them 24/7 forever, Jesus can!

We'll see this same language later when David is once again in a critical position in chapter 30. That time he strengthened *himself* in the Lord. (cf. 1 Samuel 30:6) As a true friend, Jonathan strengthened David in the Lord such that David could later strengthen *himself* in the Lord.

True friends have impact on your life even when they're not around because they've pointed you to the One who will "*never leave you nor forsake you.*" *Hebrews 13:15*

Jonathan showed up, pointed David to God, and went home. But what exactly did Jonathan give David? Not comfort. Not strategy. Promise.

### STRENGTHENED BY AN OASIS OF TRUE PROMISE

Through my life I've heard rumors that got my mind and heart mixed up. I'd live in fear and anxiety of what could happen as I played out the worst-case scenario. But here's what I've learned, about 90% of what I heard never came to fruition. And most of the 10% that did was far better than I feared it would be.

Most of what we worry about is stuff we've either made up or lies we've chosen to believe. And the hard stuff that does happen, like cancer, or loss of a loved one, or a lay-off, rarely turns out as bad as we fear. We find ourselves "getting through it" but we're not sure how. Why? Because God's children can count on something: His grace in time of need.

This was Paul's experience during incredible hardships – being shipwrecked, whipped, stoned and left for dead – he learned that Christ's grace is sufficient.

So even if your worst-case scenario does unfold, it's going to be better than you think it will because Christ, who died for you, sustains you by His grace. He gives you what you need when you need it. Not before. Not more. Not less.

Take it from Paul, who has suffered his fair share of suffering. Christ's grace is enough. You need to bank on that. And sometimes you need someone to tell you that. You need someone to point you back to what is ultimately true because that's a promise from God.

That same man, Paul, exhorts you in Philippians 4:6-9 to present your anxieties to the Lord and focus your mind on what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise. And the promise that follows is "*the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus...and the God of peace will be with you.*" *Philippians 4:7, 9*

That's another promise from God. Not freedom from hardship, but the peace of God and the God of peace in the midst of it!

But you know the ultimate promise is that you are being guarded for an inheritance that is being kept for you. (1 Peter 1:4-5) Peter wrote of a double security of an eternal inheritance in Christ. We need that promise, too, because we're all going to die.

We have promises for this life, like the ones I've mentioned. But the only guarantee is that when we die, we've got an inheritance in Heaven and Jesus waiting for us. That, friends, is a promise worth staking your life on!

If God strengthens us with true promises, it is so that we might rest in a true refuge.

## STRENGTHENED BY AN OASIS OF TRUE REFUGE

In the middle of the desert, there's this spring of water that runs through a series of pools and over waterfalls. There's shade and shelter throughout. It's a spectacular place in an otherwise barren land. I know because I've been there. I've swam in the natural pools in Engedi. It was surreal to realize I was swimming in a natural pool that David may very well have been in over 3000 years ago.

And to know that these natural pools were both a protection and a refreshment for David! A place for him to be revitalized and kept safe from Saul. Engedi was a gift of grace to David; and a gift of grace to me and all my friends.

God led David into a refuge in the wilderness that met all his needs for shelter, food, and water. No doubt He used this reprieve to restore David, reaffirm David, and prepare him for what followed.

David wrote in Psalm 23 of the Shepherd who leads us through the valley of death. He leads us beside still waters. He makes us lie down in green pastures. His rod and His staff bring comfort. This is provision and protection language.

What a completely different instinct than we saw in David in chapter 21 with Ahimelech. And look at the fruit. When David tried to provide for and protect himself, he ended up shamed and hiding in a cave. When he trusted the Lord to provide for and protect him, he ended up in Engedi.

Still being hunted. Still threatened. But trusting God completely. And God came through and He gave him true refuge.

## CHRIST CONNECTION

Jonathan rose and went to David in the wilderness and strengthened his hand in God. But he eventually went home. Jesus does not.

Paul said that when everyone abandoned him at his first defense, *"the Lord stood by me and strengthened me."* 2 Timothy 4:17 That is what Christ does. He does not merely visit you in the wilderness, He stands by you in it.

Jonathan reminded David of the promise that he would be king. Jesus does more than remind us of a promise; He is the promise. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life no one comes to the Father except through me."* John 14:6

He is not simply pointing us toward inheritance — He is our inheritance.

He did not just predict deliverance — He purchased it with His blood.

Jonathan risked much for David. Jesus gave everything for us.

When David was cornered and escape seemed impossible, God intervened and delivered. At the cross, Jesus was the One encircled. And He did *not* escape. He was captured so that we might be rescued.

The true and better David was hunted, betrayed, and handed over — not because God failed, but because He was purchasing our redemption.

And three days later, the stone was rolled away — to show that death could not hold Him.

So now:

Jesus is our greater Jonathan — He strengthens us in God and never leaves.

Jesus is our truer David — the anointed King who trusted the Father perfectly.

Jesus is our Rock of Escape — not merely slipping past death, but crushing it.

Jesus is our oasis in the wilderness — living water in a dry and weary land.

In the wilderness of life, Christ is not merely the guide to the oasis — He is the oasis, and He invites us to come to Him and eat and drink.