Faith in the Fray—Surviving or Thriving
1 Samuel 23
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Some of you will remember the old western movies like The Big Trail with John Wayne—the settlers traveling west in their covered wagons when all of a sudden over the hill a band of wild Indians comes riding in on horseback. (The old movies aren’t so politically correct these days.) The caravan would always do the same thing when attacked. They would circle the wagons to survive.

I think there are many Christian who are doing the same thing these days—circling the wagons to survive a broken world or a broken life. I’ve met families personally, who have bought farms in the middle of nowhere so as to seal themselves off from worldly influences. They’ve, in effect, circled the wagons to survive. Churches do it too. Sensing the demise of culture, focus is turned inward within the walls of the church—trying to survive. We do it as individuals too. It’s a basic survival instinct especially when we enter periods of suffering, pain, conflict or divorce. People easily shut down and shut people out. Why? To survive…to shut out what hurts. There is, of course, a time for retreat. But we were not meant to stay there.

The life of David, in 1 Samuel 23 shows us a different way to live in the midst of conflict and suffering. And it’s not “circle the wagons.” To bring us up to speed on the overarching flow of the story, David has been personally attacked numerous times and on the run—literally.

The Story
Chapter 23 opens with him receiving bad news. “1 Now they told David, ‘Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors’” (1 Sam 23:1). Keilah was a Jewish city. And the Philistines were stealing the food that they needed to live on.

What is a man of God supposed to do in that situation? You’re being hunted down and people need help. When you’re already in a pickle it’s not typical to help someone else in a pickle.

2 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.” 3 But David’s men said to him, “Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah again against the armies of the Philistines?” 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.” 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. (1 Sam 23:2-5)

His men are thinking, “What in the world are you doing…we’re in danger already from Saul…why would we go and attack another enemy?” Yet David takes the initiative to ask the Lord and in the end becomes God’s instrument of deliverance.

I want to come back to this in the application section at the end; but not before we look at what happens next. David’s victory over the Philistines was risky. Word of David’s whereabouts would inevitably get back to king Saul because of the victory, which it did.

7 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.” 8 And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. 9 David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod here.” 10 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. 11 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.” 12 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.” (1 Sam 23:7-12)

What we just read indicates that the people David saved would have surrendered him to king Saul. Did you get that? The very people David saved would have betrayed him. Have you ever helped someone only to be turned on? It’s deeply painful. From what we know of our own humanity, I think it’s safe to say that it would have been deeply discouraging to David, which explains what happens next. Betrayed and on the run an oasis was found, named Jonathan.

16 And Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Hores, 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. Saul my father also knows this.” 18 And the two of them made a covenant before the LORD. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home. (1 Sam 23:16-18)

Once again, God’s grace comes to David through the loyalty of his trusted friend Jonathan. Like a personal delivery from the throne of God himself, he comes to “strengthen his hand in God” (23:16). Jonathan does so by redirecting David’s thoughts to the promise that “you shall be king over Israel.” This hope-filled promise is like putting high-octane fuel into David’s tank. That’s how God’s promises function in our hearts. He’s strengthened by God’s gracious promise. It’s a good example of how Christian friendship is supposed to work—to strengthen each other’s hand in God with his promises. It’s not schmaltzy sentiment that people need in desperate times but words from God delivered by a loving friend. (This would be the last time David and Jonathan would see each other.)

This gift of grace is then followed by another betrayal. David is hiding in the wilderness of Ziph, which is his tribal homeland—the land of Judah. The Ziphites were part of David’s clan. Look at what they do.

19 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? 20 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.” (1 Sam 23:19-20)

We’ve seen that word “surrender” before in this chapter. First it was the people of Keilah, whom David saved. Now it’s his own clan ratting him out. His family turns on him. And a chase ensues—a nail biter. Saul is in hot pursuit of David.

26 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, 27 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. (1 Sam 23:26-28)

If this was a Hollywood film, you’d hear dramatic Hans Zimmer music playing and slow motion HD video as David is running and Saul’s men are closing in. Saul’s proverbial hands are around David’s neck when a panicked messenger comes out of blue and says, “The Philistines are coming! The Philistines are coming!” Defcon1! And Saul abandons the chase
and hurries off to deal with the Philistines just in the nick of time. It’s as if the Philistine attack was perfectly timed (it was). And David gets away yet again—by the skin of his teeth.

The Application Point

When you put this all together, you realize that amidst all the attacks and betrayals, David is not circling the wagons and merely surviving. Rather, he’s courageously acting on behalf of God’s kingdom, his people. He is willing to be used by the hand of God to save his people in the midst of his own crisis. In other words, he’s not shutting down amidst the persecution, he’s surging forward. He’s willing and asking, “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?”

If I was to summarize this in Jesus’ words I’d say that David is truly “seek(ing) first the kingdom of God” and not his own personal survival. He was being chased by one enemy and fighting another. Let me ask you straight up. Where is your life as a disciple of Jesus? Have things happened to you in the past or present that have shut you down. Perhaps it’s something that’s happened to you in a church (perhaps this church), that has prompted you to circled your wagons into survive. Perhaps it’s failure. Fear. Dark circumstances. If you were to be honest with yourself and the LORD, could you say that you’re seeking first his kingdom and not simply trying surviving the turbulence of life?

I don’t have to tell you that life is painful sometimes…and sometimes it comes from those closest to you. The brokenness of the world and its people is a given. You can count on it everywhere. But how do you deal with it? Shut down? Circle the wagons? It’s precisely in those times that we should be looking for opportunities to be God’s instrument of grace and love—showing with our lives and speaking with our lips the sufficiency and glory of Jesus.

Like David, we’ve been called to a singular cause…and that cause is to be instruments of God’s saving grace in a broken world. You can’t be an instrument of saving grace in a circle of wagons. All David had to do was be willing and ask, “Lord shall I go fight?” And God saved.

But the only way to really get out of the survival mode of life is faith—to believe again that God’s grace will be experienced as you enter life again. Grace is experienced as we engage life not hide from it. If you scan back over the story you can see God’s grace every step of the way. The Lord graciously answered David’s prayer for direction. He gave him victory over the Philistines. He gave him strength through his friend Jonathan at just the right moment. And he providentially delivered David by a Philistine attack in just the nick of time. In all these different ways David experienced God’s grace. If we really believe he’s there for us moment by moment then we don’t have to live behind the circle of wagons. Nor should we. We weren’t called to save our lives but lose them for Christ’s sake. Only then will we really discover what it means to live. Only then will we move from surviving to thriving; from whining to worshipping as we experience God’s grace moving in our lives. David ended these difficult times in worship, as recorded in Psalm 54 (written during this chapter).

> 6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. 7 For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies. (Psalm 54:6-7)

Today we come to the Lord’s Table. And if you think about it, you’ll realize that amidst the betrayal, denial, abandonment, injustice and torture, Jesus didn’t circle the wagons either. He didn’t shut down, but sought to rescue us at his own expense. That’s kingdom living amidst brokenness. Perhaps it’s time to enter into life again and pull down the walls. It’s not about avoiding pain to preserve self, but enduring the pain to love others.