

INTRO: Over the last few years we have seen the rise of what many people refer to as cancel culture. Whether you support that culture or not, Wikipedia¹ cites Dictionary.com's pop-culture definition of cancel culture as "withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive." According to the same Wikipedia article, cancelling a person or company can range from cultural boycott to intimidation or mob harassment, and often leads to someone being excluded from social media platforms, fired from a job, or blackballed in professional circles. Whatever you might think of today's so-called cancel culture, we see David enduring something even worse in 1Sam 23 (page 245), where Saul is trying not just to cancel David but to literally kill him. And Saul has such a violent reputation that he intimidates whole cities into cooperating with him. Yet even as Saul hunts David down and forces him out of civilization and into the wilderness, God protects and sustains David and his growing little band of soldiers, so that no matter how hard Saul tries, he cannot even find David, much less cancel him. By the end of our time together this morning I hope you'll see how David's experience points us to Jesus, and I hope you will actually side with Jesus and cast in your lot with him, even though humanity has often tried to cancel Him by consensus.

READ 23:1-5. David is probably still in the caves of Adullam when he gets word that the Philistines are raiding a nearby Israelite town to steal their grain. Keilah was an isolated little burg in Judah's tribal territory (Josh 15:44). The Philistines are doing smash-and-grabs on Keilah's grain floors, so this is probably during or after the summer harvest.² So here David is, hiding out from Saul's homicidal rage; yet David can't help wanting to help his tribesmen in Keilah. David's compassion for Keilah leads him to fight on two fronts. He wants to rescue Keilah, while he's running from Saul. David doesn't quit fighting God's enemies just because Saul is treating David like the enemy. David does not give in to self-pity. He's still others centered, still looking to see and meet needs even from inside his cave, still trying to do right for God's people even though some of God's people are doing him wrong. David fights for God's people even while, and even though, God's people fight against David. He doesn't spiral inward or downward. He remains outward oriented, and upward oriented. To put it bluntly, David knows how to take a lickin' and keep on tickin' as a man of God. He's not going to just stay in his man cave licking his own wounds. He hears this report as a call to action to rescue God's people.

This is exemplary maturity from David, and it is not moralism to imitate him. In the apostle Paul's words, "*these things took place as examples for us*" (1Cor 10:6). Christian man, Christian woman, don't give in to self-pity or reclusiveness when you get hurt or rejected by God's people. God's people might hurt you. They might make you want to stay in your cave and never help them again because they hurt you. That's understandable...but it is not at all godly or mature, and it will render you useless to others in your faith. People leave churches over things like "We had lots of people over and no one reciprocated." If David thought like that, 1Samuel would have ended right here, and Israel would have been engulfed by Philistia. If Jesus had thought like that, we'd still be in our sins. Brother, don't be easily disillusioned. Sister, don't be easily offended. Being slow to disillusionment and offense makes us resilient and keeps us fruitful.

But David's compassion for his people is contingent on God's plans. Here, for the first time, we read "*David inquired of the Lord,*" and he will do it again in v.10. He's acting like a king who has a special relationship with God and commission from God. No more tricks like he played on Ahimelech or Achish in the previous chapters. David is now led by seeking God's word. So in v.2 the Lord answers that he should in fact "*attack the Philistines and save Keilah.*" Apparently David goes back and relays God's

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cancel_culture

² Firth notes "this raid occurred in summer when the harvest had been brought in, since the raid's target was the threshing floor" (Apollos, 249).

answer to his force of 400, but his men are not so sure they want to poke the bear. “*We are afraid here in Judah, how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?*”³ David’s ragtag band of brothers is shaking in their boots because of Saul and his army, which is nothing compared to the ARMIES, plural, of the Philistines, who had control of all the iron for making swords and armor and chariots. The Philistines are working with the ancient equivalents of drones and kevlar, while the Israelites are stuck using catapults and slings. Better to hunker down than borrow trouble.

So David goes back to ask God again; but of course, God’s word doesn’t change just because it scares us. So David leads his troops into battle despite their fears. He encourages them to counsel and conquer their fear of man and fear of the world by their faith in God’s word—God’s promise, God’s presence, God’s power, God’s command. The Philistines had the odds; but David and his men had God; and whoever has God, wins. This is leadership by faith in God’s word, trumping the fear of man in those who are led, in order to show love and compassion to God’s people under attack in Keilah. Christian leaders cannot be faithless for their followers. Odds and appearances cannot rule the day. God’s word must lead and motivate God’s people, even if it looks like “borrowing trouble.” And boy does David borrow trouble.

READ 23:6-14. Verse 6 sets the stage. The priest Abiathar had fled to David for refuge, and the ephod came with him. In the OT, the ephod was the only authorized way to confirm God’s will for battle, and now it’s with David, not Saul. Meanwhile in v.7, Saul is giddy when he hears David is in Keilah, because to Saul, that means “*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.’*” Contrast that with David. David inquires of God before attacking...twice. Saul just hears and says and concludes and acts. Saul acts on presumption without prayer, and against God’s previous word rejecting him as king. Saul is totally clueless about his own relationship to God. Saul assumes God is still working for him! Yet God had already told him as early as chapter 15 that he was rejected as king for rejecting God’s word. And here he is again, rejecting God’s very word about rejecting him as king. Saul presumes God is with him, when God is actually against him. That is not just presumption. That is spiritual self-deception, and it is the great danger of the human heart. Make sure that doesn’t become you, friend. Examine yourself. Are you taking God’s holiness and authority seriously? Are you repenting of your sins? Are you trusting in Jesus’ righteousness instead of your own to make you right with God? Are you trusting in Jesus’ death to atone for your sins? Are you loving Christ and his word and His people? Don’t deceive yourself and then presume on God.

Saul’s thinking is even cast in terms of **Ex 14:3**, where “*Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’*” Saul chasing David into the wilderness acts just like Pharaoh chasing Israel into the wilderness. David is acting the part of Israel. And here again, Saul is self-guided. Look at how it’s narrated in vv.7-8. Saul said...and Saul summoned. That’s Saul’s M.O. He sees or hears something, he draws his own conclusion, and he acts based on his own interests in holding power against God’s word. Contrast that with how David makes his decisions in v.9-12. He calls the priest, asks for the ephod, and approaches God. Of course, the fact that David has the ephod is the

³ R.P. Gordon notes that “here in Judah (3) clearly implies that Keilah was not within the Judahite ambit at this point (cf. v.12)” (176), but Judges 15:44 implies Keilah was set apart as a Judahite city at the conquest. D. Firth considers Keilah to be “within Judah, and more likely to be loyal to him (unless it was still an independent Canaanite city)” (Apollos 249). So Firth interprets the significance as “The Philistines were a threat within Judah—how much more if David’s men attacked them?” (249). Baldwin alone, it seems, adds the tribal dynamic to the mercenary motive: “Ziph, like Keilah, belonged to Judah, but its inhabitants remained loyal to Saul, despite the fact that David was of their tribe. No doubt they hoped to profit in some way from their betrayal of David’s position” (TOTC, 153). Firth’s single-minded focus on divine presence crowds out the theme of human betrayal.

clinger, which shows that God is with him and for him. Yet part of the point is also that David actually uses it, obediently, faithfully, to discern God's word. *David knew...David said, 'O Lord...'* Saul hears news, and he speaks his own word. David hears news, and he seeks God's word.⁴ That should be true of us as well. We pray. We study God's final word in Scripture. We ask Him for his wisdom in how to apply his word. And we order our priorities and our lives around His word, not our own, even amid danger.

But when David asks God if the men of Keilah will surrender him to Saul, he gets a disappointing answer. *"They will surrender you."* I mean, that disappoints s! David just saved Keilah from the Philistines, and now they would turn on him? And this is David's own tribe—Keilah is in Judah! Now, in their defense, they had probably heard what Saul did to Nob City, so it's understandable.⁵ They're just trying to stay alive. Still, you'd think they'd show some gratitude and loyalty to David, right? But that was not to be, and David quickly learns that he can put no hope or confidence in people. God must be his only hope.

It is this betrayal that thrusts David back out into the Wilderness. David escapes Keilah before Saul gets there to trap him inside the city wall, and when Saul hears of David's escape, he quits for the day. Yet that doesn't mean Saul gives up. *"Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand."* Now read the end of that paragraph in light of its beginning. What did Saul assume in v.7? *God has given him into my hand.* So confident; and the episode ends exactly opposite of Saul's presumption. *God did not give him into his hand,* even as Saul chases David day after day. God is sovereign to protect his servant against all the hostile intentions of his enemies, even when those who owe David loyalty betray him. Still, even the strongest Christian leader can feel weakened by continued trials. And Jonathan gets it.

READ 23:15-18.⁶ David realizes Saul is coming after him day in and day out, even into the wilderness. It's hard to know exactly how he feels because the text doesn't tell us, but Jonathan seems to know how David feels and what David needs. David is weak, afraid, at a loss for what to do, and doesn't know who he can trust. So what does it look like to be in a covenanted friendship under God's kindness? *"And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh."* That's the first step. Jonathan thinks of things from David's perspective and gets up and goes to where David is. Christians bear one another's burdens and sorrows, which is what we've committed to in our own church covenant. Member of Grace Covenant, when you see someone struggling, go to them. We are growing in this. But let's excel even more at it. Jonathan shows us how. He enters David's world of sad confusion. And when he gets there, what's he do?

He doesn't just make chit chat. He *"strengthened his hand in God."* Brother, sister, do you know how to strengthen someone else's hand in God? This is real fellowship, and it's how committed Christian fellowship is different than socializing. Unbelievers socialize. Only Christians can fellowship. Fellowship is not just hanging out and talking about things you have in common or doing hobbies together. That's socializing, and it's fine for Christians. But it's not fellowship. Fellowship happens when we find our

⁴ D. Firth (Apollos, 247) notes that "the particular phraseology [in v.6] effectively personifies the ephod," citing Fokkelman. "Abiathar's ephod was presumably like the cultic garment mentioned in the Torah (cf. Exod 28:6-35) that had attached to it a pouch containing the revelatory Urim and Thummim. Thus with Abiathar's arrival David now had acquired access to the only revelatory device sanctioned by the Torah (cf. Num 27:21)" (R. Bergen, NAC 232).

⁵ Gordon notes the ingratitude as well, but graciously recognizes that "The recent example of Nob would have dissuaded almost any community from siding with an opponent of Saul, when that opponent had as limited resources as David had" (176).

⁶ "David was not too difficult to find, as is clear from those who joined him and from Jonathan's subsequent visit. But Saul could not find him because of God's actions, of which the events at Keilah were a specific example... Try as he may, Saul cannot catch David, even though others can" (D. Firth, Apollos 251).

common conversation and encouragement in Christ, in God's covenant with us in Him, in His promises to us, and our commitment to Christ and to each other in those promises.

Jonathan strengthened David's hand *in God*—in God. In God's presence, power, and promises. This is not a self-esteem boost, or a nice platitude, "everything's gonna be OK." This is not a patronizing pat on the head "there, there." It's not "look-on-the-bright-side" "cup-is-half-full" positive thinking. It's not "take it like a man." It's certainly not name it and claim it. It's believe what God has promised you in His word, and persevere with courage based on that. "*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.*" This is all rooted in previous divine revelation, both to David and to Saul. God had already told Saul, through Samuel, that he was now rejected as king. Samuel had already anointed David. And Saul is about to admit it with his own mouth in 24:20 "*I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand.*" Therefore, whatever is going on with Keilah and Saul, that's not going to be the last word. God will have the last word, because it's his word that drives history. And now, on the basis of God's commitment and promise to David, Jonathan and David commit to being loyal to each another. That is fellowship—commitment to each other under a common faith in God's promises.⁷ But David's time in the wilderness is not over. Another betrayal is coming [for "strengthened" in v.16, cf. Acts 14:22].

READ 23:19-24. Whereas Jonathan went to David and strengthened his hand in God, the Ziphites do the opposite. They know where David is, but they go up to Saul in Gibeah and offer to lead him straight to David so they can get credit for handing David over to Saul. And they're awfully fawning, "*Now come down, o king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part will be to surrendering him into the king's hand.*" That's as smarmy as it gets. It's nauseating.⁸ But true to form, Saul receives their help with his typical spiritual presumption and victim mentality. "*May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me.*" Saul is full of it. He is pronouncing God's blessing on them (as if he still has that right), for telling him where God's chosen king is so that Saul can off him. Rich. And the reason he wants God to bless them is nothing about their godliness or their obedience to the ten commandments or their common fellowship in God's character and ways. It's "*you have had compassion on me, me, ME.* Finally, someone feels sorry for me. You are helping me cling to the power that I know God is taking away from me."

And now he tells them to leave nothing to chance. Look at the repetition. "*Make still more sure... Know and see... see therefore and take note... sure information.*" Saul and the Ziphites do everything in their power to make it certain that they know exactly where to find David so that they get him this time for sure. (almost reminds you of making Jesus tomb "as secure as you know how"). Not only that, Saul commits to go with them and search David out even if he has to look for him like a needle in a haystack. This is obsessive. Now think about this. Saul is the king. Saul's the one who is supposed to be fighting Israel's enemies. But who fought off the Philistines for Keilah? David. And who is Saul trying to execute? David. Saul is as bad a king as you could ask for; and ironically, he's just what Israel asked for—a king like all the other nations have.

⁷ "We best encourage not by being cuddly with people but by reminding them of the promises of God. Encouragement from God for the people of God comes from the word of God. I am not depreciating the helpfulness of the personal touch or care, but in an age that wallows in 'caring' and 'sensitivity' on every hand believers need to know that solid encouragement comes not from emotional closeness but from God's speech" (D.R. Davis, FOTB 239).

⁸ "If the instinct of self-preservation in the men of Keilah endangered David, these Ziphites seem to have been impelled by outright antipathy towards him" (Gordon, 177).

READ 23:24b-29. The Ziphites spring into action, David hears the footsteps and runs again. And in 26 it gets tense. Saul's getting way too close for comfort. Saul and David are on different sides of the same mountain. David is hurrying. Saul is closing in, maybe sending troops around both sides to trap David.⁹ It's getting tense! Yet right when Saul and his men are ready to pounce, they get word of a Philistine raid on the land and they have to give up the chase. And all of a sudden, David is safe again. Now what are the chances of that? That is not chance at all. It's God's sovereignty protecting God's servant. So they give the place a memorial name, and David goes and lives in the strongholds of Engedi, because as many scholars note, Engedi is a natural spring in the wilderness, an oasis. There's water there.¹⁰ And with David safe for now, the episode fades to black.

But as it does, there's a song playing in the background. It's the song David wrote about this episode in Ziph in **Psalm 54**. "*O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth. For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves. Behold God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them. With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*" **God protects his servant**, even when everyone really is out to get him, and David knows it.

Christ. David's betrayal by his own people, and God's provision for him through it, hints at what Jesus would endure. When God's word became flesh, *he came to his own and his own did not receive him* (John 1:11). Jesus said it himself when he was rejected by people in Nazareth, "*A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.*" It was not politic for Keilah or the Ziphites to help David. And it is all the more true today about Jesus. It is not politically expedient to day to display loyalty to the Jesus of history and Scripture—any other king but him, the world says. In the words of Jesus' parable, "*we do not want this man to rule over us.*" Yet the world cannot cancel Jesus any more than Saul could cancel David, try as it might. The nations still conspire together and rage against Christ; the rulers of the earth take their stand against God's anointed servant-king Jesus. But God still laughs, because He is still sovereign, and He has already installed His king on His holy mountain. As David would be a better king for Israel than Saul, so Jesus is a better king for our hearts than we ourselves are. Yet just like Saul, the impulse of the human heart is to pity itself, to be jealous and angry toward Jesus, and try to get rid of him, because his righteousness makes our sinfulness look bad. That's exactly what happened when he came into the world. Yet we could not cancel Jesus even by crucifying him, because God raised him from the dead to save and vindicate him, and God accepted Jesus back to the throne of heaven to rule over God's kingdom. And Jesus will come back one day to save all his trusting people, and also to judge all those who want to cancel him. He will consign them to hell, where he himself will preside over their everlasting punishment there. Don't let that be you, friend. Turn from your sin and unbelief and trust in Jesus to save and rule your life with a wisdom and righteousness that's better than yours [invite].

1Samuel 23 is full of references to the wilderness. Five times in the second half of the chapter we read that David is somewhere in some wilderness. It is no accident that Jesus starts his own public ministry being tempted by the Devil "in the wilderness." David himself was reliving Israel's wilderness experience after refusing to enter Canaan because they were too afraid. Even after David made the kingdom a success, Israel rebelled against God's law and love so badly that he sent them into exile. But just as David found springs of water at Engedi, God promised the exiled Israelites in **Isa 35:6** "*Waters break forth in*

⁹ D. Firth, AOTC 252.

¹⁰ Baldwin, TOTC 154; R. Bergen, NAC 237; "Goat's Spring" (R.P. Gordon 178).

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the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water....” God would come and lead them back home, all the way through the wilderness. So he promised in Isa 40:3, *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* And that is how the Gospel of Mark begins, with “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord. And immediately, the Lord Himself comes in the person of Jesus. He is baptized by John to identify with us in our sinful condition, and then the Spirit of God thrusts him out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and to prove His loyalty to God. And just as David was sustained by God’s word in his wilderness, so Jesus was sustained by God’s word in his wilderness (Num 14:33-35; Isa 35:6c; 40:3; Mk 1:3, 12).

We rightly feel sorry for David when he saves the men of Keilah only to hear that they’d have sold him out to Saul. David couldn’t even trust the people he saved. But even that testifies to Jesus. In **John 2:23**, many people *believed in Jesus’ name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*” Look at the selfishness of the human heart. Keilah is you and me—too afraid of what the world would do to us to risk anything at all for loyalty to the Son of David.

The Church. In Christ, the church is like David’s 600 men here in chapter 23. Peter tells us we are strangers and exiles in this world because of our loyalty to Jesus as King (1P 2:11-12). John shows us in Rev 12 that when the Christ child is eventually caught up to God and to his throne, “the woman fled [where?] into the wilderness” (v.5-6). *“And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”*

Brothers and sisters, we are now in the wilderness, and the great dragon makes war on us. But our God is with us. Jesus said he will never leave us or forsake us. And so even while the dragon is chasing us, we go on making disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, son, and Spirit, and teaching them to observe all Jesus commanded us. We flee from the great enemy of God who seeks to destroy His church, and at the same time we reach out to save as many people in our own Keilah as we can. We don’t give in to self-pity. We don’t insulate ourselves in the safe confines of our own cave of Adullam. We hear that people outside our cave need to be saved, we bank on the promises of God’s word, we conquer our fear of man with our faith in Christ’s presence and power and promises, and we get out there in the power and name and Spirit of Christ Jesus.

The Spirit. And when we are betrayed and double-crossed by those we hoped to see saved, when the world returns our good with its evil, then God has given us an Engedi Oasis right here in our hearts. Jesus invites us in John 7:37 “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘*Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*’” And he said this about the Spirit. And in that Spirit, we pray for God’s deliverance. *“O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth.*

The Christian. In all of this, Christian, you are responsible to seek Scripture, as David inquired of the Lord. What distinguished David from Saul? David never made a move without consulting God's word, whereas Saul just presumed that God would help him, even though Saul neglected and rejected God's word. Christian, you should be reading your Bible every day. That's where you inquire of the Lord. You should be praying every day, asking God for his saving and sanctifying power to permeate your life, like David did in Psalm 54. To neglect God's word is to be like Saul. To inquire of God's word by reading Scripture, to pray to God regularly over all the cares of your soul and the cares of God's people, that is like David. Brother, sister, how can you ever become the kind of godly friend Jonathan is, if you don't know God's promises, God's word? How will you ever strengthen other saints *in God* if you are not getting stronger in Scripture yourself?

After the apostle Paul had planted churches, he went back to all of them in **Acts 14:22**, "*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*" And you know what else he did? "*He appointed for them elders in every church*" who could locally strengthen those disciples in God's word since Paul himself could not be in all those churches at once. Brother, you should want to be that kind of man. But to be that man, you have to read and meditate on God's word yourself, every day, so you know how to use it to strengthen yourself and others.

This goes for us as a church with other churches as well. We as a church should want to strengthen the hand of other local churches in God, just as Jonathan strengthened David. That's why we pray that we'd be a good example for other churches. It's why we want to interact with the other churches represented in the Chicagoland Gospel Network. It's why we want to be a church that trains and sends out pastors to lead and love other local churches. We should not sit self-satisfied that our own church is healthy when many others are not. We should try to do all we can to strengthen their hand in God.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan's personal presence encouraged David; but Jonathan's greatest encouragement was to remind David of God's promise. Why was that? It was because God is invincible, and that means his promise of salvation is reliable, even when all appearances and experiences are to the contrary. For all of you who love Jesus, take heart. If the world could not cancel Christ by crucifixion, then it cannot cancel him by consensus either. They already killed him, and he is already risen from the dead. He has already poured out his Spirit into the hearts of all who repent and believe, and He wells up within us like a spring of living water no matter how dry this world becomes for His people. So even if the world cancels you for your loyalty to Jesus, you will still be in the best of company, because Christ will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. And he knows the wilderness well enough to lead you through it.