

WHEN LIFE GETS OUT OF CONTROL, PART 4

1 Samuel 23–24

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Our Scripture today is once more taken from 1 Samuel. Today, we're looking at chapters 23 and 24. We have been in kind of a subsection of this series in 1 Samuel called "When Life Gets out of Control." I intended to do this in one message—to cover chapters 21–24. But we've slowed down, and this is the fourth and last in this subsection.

As we have gone through these chapters, we have seen there are some things we're probably going to do wrong when circumstances are not pleasant. I suggested that David did three things wrong. We are human, we have frailties and faults and sins, and God knows that. That doesn't mean that God is through with us when we fail or err or when we make mistakes. David did three things wrong in his time of trouble. He lied. He feared—his faith failed him and he doubted. And he also made a really stupid blunder. He wandered into Goliath's hometown seeking refuge—not the best place to go. He made a dumb mistake.

All of us in life can think of at least one really stupid thing we've done or said that we wish we hadn't. We also notice that David did some things right. We've looked at three things he did right. Today we're going to look at three more.

The things David did right. First, he did not remain alone. He gathered others around him. It's important when we're going through a time of difficulty that we do not try to be a lone ranger—without the support, strength, counsel, prayer, and help of others. The second thing David did right was he did not become so self-absorbed in his own problem that he neglected taking care of his legitimate responsibilities. He had responsibility—especially toward his parents—to make sure they were safe. He could have stayed in his cave and said, "I'm only concerned about my

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life and my safety.” But he came out of his own problem long enough to take care of his own responsibility. We need to do that when we’re in difficulty—get up and face our responsibilities. The third thing David did right was he kept his heart open to God—by prophet, priest, and song. He kept his life open to the Lord.

Today, we’ll look at the fourth thing he did right—and the fifth and the sixth. They’re found in 1 Samuel 23 and 24.

I. The fourth thing David did right was he did not demand reward for doing right.

He did the right thing in chapter 23, verses 1–14. He was once more hiding from Saul. He was in a place called Keilah. He gets word that the citizens of Keilah had their grain harvest robbed by the Philistines. They have taken the harvest at threshing time. That may not ring a bell with us. We’d say, “So what?” But if someone attacked or garnished your wages without cause for the next six months, believe me, you would be alarmed. You would want somebody to come to your defense and help you. In an agricultural community where the grain harvest is everything, that meant six months work—sowing and weeding and growing and cutting and harvesting and threshing—all stolen.

David could have sat back and said, “It’s too dangerous for me to get involved. That’s what Saul, the king, is for. It’s his realm. He can come to their defense.” But instead he says, “I’ve got a group of people here who can deliver these people. I’ll come to their aid.” After helping them, he winds up in their city. Then he begins to realize, “I’m in a walled city! Is Saul going to get me? I’m not free, like when I’m in the wilderness. Maybe I’ll get trapped here. Maybe this town will turn me over to Saul. I’m trapped.” So he goes to the Lord and inquires, “Will these people turn me over?” And the Lord says to him, “Yes, they will.” So David gets out of there.

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What is striking about this is—if anybody shouldn't have turned him over to his enemy, it should have been these people. They should have been like Rahab—willing to hide him for the good he had done for them. They are ready to receive the benefits from him, but they are not ready to express thanks.

What do you expect when you've done something real nice for someone? You expect a thank you. If you've given a gift, you expect a thank you note. A word of commendation. A word of approval. A returned favor. Those kinds of things we expect when we've done something nice for someone. But, when we've done something nice and not only have we not been rewarded, but we've been turned against—then we begin to have our problems. We don't like that.

Perhaps you have faced that. Perhaps at work—the person you helped learn the job gets promoted over you. Or the child in the family you helped the most is the most ungrateful. Or the husband you helped put through school is the one who, when he gets his diploma, runs off with someone else. Or you've had some close friend with whom you've shared your inner life—your thoughts, your secrets, your perspectives—and they've turned around and communicated those things to others and used that information against you. You say, "I can't cope with that."

What are our options when these kinds of things happen to us? David could have retaliated. He could have said, "You people are not going to do that to me, and I am going to punish you severely. I'll kill you. I'll set fire to your town!" But had David done that, he would have been no different than Saul, who killed the innocent priests in the situation we looked at last week in 1 Samuel 22. What would make David's behavior any different from Saul's behavior, who killed Ahimelech? No, David is not going to adopt the personality of his enemy.

He also does not resort to rage. Rage is simply uncontrolled anger. If that had happened to you or me, maybe we'd have had a sense of ferocity. "How dare they do this? I risked my life for these

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people, and they turn around and do this to me?” When we become enraged, then we lose our ability to be rational and calmly work our way through a situation. David kept his peace. Maybe he put himself in their shoes. He realized how truly scared they were of Saul. They knew Saul. But they also knew David well enough—they didn’t have to fear him; he wasn’t going to do anything mean to them. That wasn’t his trademark—his habitual manner of working. But Saul had killed all these innocent priests. Surely the word had got out, “If we help David at all, when he leaves, Saul will kill all of us.” I think David justifies their action because he knows they’re afraid.

I remember a sermon by my pastor entitled “I Sat Where They Sat, and I Was Astonished,” out of Ezekiel. He said, “So often we, in our own shoes, turn around and judge other people. If we only lived with the circumstances they lived with, we’d be a lot more kind and a lot more understanding.” I’ve tried to remember that. David had that kind of attitude toward these citizens. I think he said, “I understand why they’re afraid.” He did not rage. He did not retaliate. He is not going to let his personality be changed when he is not rewarded for doing right.

If we begin to develop an attitude of hostility and bitterness when we have not been rewarded for doing right, then we’re sitting on an emotional volcano that could someday erupt. David avoids becoming consumed when he is not rewarded for doing right. Right has its own reward—whether or not it is externally rewarded.

II. The fifth thing that David did right was he did not let the negative actions and words of others define what he thought of himself—or what God thought of him.

I know there’s a lot in that statement. We need to break it down. At the end of chapter 23, David was dealing with a group of people called the Ziph. David had not done anything nice for the Ziph, but also the Ziph were under no imminent danger for David being there. Yet, they actively

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betrayed him and went to Saul. They said to Saul, “He’s hiding in our midst, and we’ll turn him over to you.” By reading Psalm 54, you see David reflects upon the fact that they think mean things about him.

It is often the case that in our own life—we interpret God’s view of us by our circumstances and by what other people are saying about us. So, if everything’s going our way—we’ve got a good boyfriend or girlfriend, a happy home, good children, and money in the bank—we say, “God’s pleased with me. I’m happy. Life’s wonderful. God smiles from heaven on me. I must be a good person.” But if we’re having trouble of any kind, we immediately look around and are tempted to say, “What did I do wrong? What’s God angry with me about? Why am I experiencing this?” Or it’s also true that if we have a person who has a lot of influence in our life—like a parent, friend, or spouse—and they’re feeding us a lot of negative information about ourselves, we can so easily begin to think God thinks of us that way. It’s often true that a person who has had a bad human father has the most difficult time understanding what the Scriptures talk to us about a good heavenly Father. We interpret ourselves and God’s attitude toward us by what we’re being fed by our circumstances or from other people.

That’s a tremendous hurricane against the good development of our emotional souls. Adverse circumstances blow like a tremendous gale against the tiny tree of our own life—just standing, taking the assault, and we will tip over. We’ll begin to think that’s what God thinks of us. David did not confuse the Ziph’s opinion of him with God’s opinion of him. He didn’t meld the two. He was not saying, “If that’s what they think of me, then that must be what God thinks of me.” That’s been part of my objection to the positive confession movement in the charismatic community. Just at the time when we most need good mental health, when we’re pressed on all sides, or when we are ill—then we’re told that our problem is a sign that we’ve displeased God,

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sinned, or failed to have faith. Therefore, we are told to interpret God's view of ourselves by the circumstances we are in. David did not do that, and it is one reason he stayed so healthy in this time of adversity. God loved us while we were yet sinners. We must not interpret our adverse circumstances as a sign of God's abandonment or displeasure. "The rain," Scripture says, "falls on the just and the unjust." The ill wind blows on the wise builder's house and on the foolish builder's house—without discrimination.

Sometimes sin and unbelief can have something to do with what's wrong with us, but that is not what Scripture teaches as a general rule. I think we need a steady diet of Romans 8:30–39. It says, "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" The answer is nothing. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The answer is no one. God is for us, and nothing can separate us. We need to keep reminding ourselves of that daily until the truth is not only intellectual, but it becomes emotional as well. God is for us. Jesus has already paid for our sins. We bear them no more.

Advanced age may be a time when we start to think God's love for us is not as strong as it was when we were younger—when we were working and before retirement. Now that we're suffering illness and difficulty, we're reading that as a sign that God has abandoned us. There are those of you who may be struggling with that. Such a reading would not conform to the very nature of the God who loves you. God loves us, not because we are useful to Him, but He loves us just because of who we are. When life's circumstances aren't pleasant in advancing age, grab hold of the realities that are in God.

David did not let the circumstances or the negativity of the Ziph alter his understanding of God's love for him. He explicitly says it in Psalm 54. He wrote this Psalm when the Ziph had gone to Saul and said "Is not David hiding among us?" He says words like "Strangers are attacking me;

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worthless men seek my life—men without regard for God. Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.” What’s he saying here? “People are against me, God’s not.” He says the same thing in Psalm 142. In that Psalm are phrases like “No one cares for me.” Then immediately he says, “I cry to you, O LORD; You are my refuge.” He’s saying, “If no one cares, Lord, You care.” That’s letting God’s truth stand stronger than external circumstances. David kept his mental health by remembering that. Just because the climate was negative, it didn’t mean God was negative.

III. The sixth thing David did in his day of trouble was he did not lose control of himself when life was out of control.

He did not lose control within himself. We see this in 1 Samuel 24, where David is in the cave at En Gedi. That’s a beautiful place. It’s just north of the Dead Sea in the Judean wilderness. The floor of the Dead Sea is the lowest spot on earth. Back in those barren hills is the gorgeous oasis and wonderful gushing springs that are watering En Gedi.

David’s hiding out. The modern translations tell us what Saul actually did was go into a cave to use the toilet. David and his men are back in the cave—back in the inner recesses of the cave. And Saul doesn’t know they are there. David has Saul’s life within his hands. He has every reason and every human excuse to lose control at that moment and attack Saul. There are plenty of reasons. Saul had repeatedly sought his life. Saul had alienated David from his own wife and from his best friend, Jonathan. Saul had absolutely made David’s life miserable for months and years on end. He had forced him into hiding. He had displaced David’s family. He had cost David immense amounts of pleasure, success, and tranquility. So if David had attacked Saul, we’d have said, “We can certainly understand the feeling.” But he doesn’t lose control of

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himself. Why doesn't he? I want to share with you things we see in David about how he maintained self-control in a situation where he could have easily lost control.

A. One of the reasons why he kept self-control was he did not accumulate anger. We have referenced this a number of times in our journey through 1 Samuel. I think that's one of the great struggles of life—gaining control and letting Christ help you with your anger. If you gunny sack anger too much and store it, it's going to wind up not only biting somebody else, but biting you too. You've got to find ways to release it—whether it's hitting a pillow or whatever. I recommend you try some other ways. I'm not sure that gets rid of the anger. We need to release it from the heart, verbally, and to God in prayer. It's never necessarily an easy thing to do. We need to keep watching the level of anger in our life and not let it accumulate. David was not angry with Saul. Incredibly, as much as Saul had done to him, David kept coming to the Lord and saying, "Help me deal with this. Help me not hold this against this man." David bore Saul no malice.

In spite of all that Saul had done toward David, David would not lift a finger against Saul. He may have been disappointed with Saul, and many times his righteous anger flared up. But he didn't let his bad side of anger get in control of his dealings with Saul. When Saul actually dies, David, in his eulogy, comments about how lovely and pleasant Saul was in his lifetime. That's how much he didn't hate this man. He was able to say a good word about him.

Jesus says of our enemies that we're not only to pray for them and do good to them, but we are to bless them. The word "bless" is a Greek word that means "to speak well of." It means we've got a choice in the matter of speaking ill of or speaking well of. David would speak well of his enemies. It was his way of coping with his anger. That's not easy, is it? But that's what Christ is calling us to do.

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B. The second reason he was able to keep control of himself was he submitted his thoughts and his actions to the Lord. He didn't plunge ahead in emotion. He submitted his plans and actions to the Lord. How do I know this? In 1 Samuel 24:4, you'll find that the men who were with David in the cave said "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to do with as you wish'" (NIV). They said, "It's a favorable circumstance. God must have put him here. Now you can have your vengeance on him." But back in 23:7, Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah. And Saul said, "God has handed him over to me, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars" (NIV). Same identical thing—it looks like a favorable circumstance.

What are we going to conclude if we've got favorable circumstances? God gave us these circumstances? So we act. I'm amazed at how many times we blame God for our decisions, when really God wasn't in them at all. Saul says, "The fact that David is holed up in a city with walls must mean God gave him to me." David is tempted to say, "Because Saul is holed up in a cave where I can get him, God gave him to me." That's what David's friends are saying, "Use the logic of Saul." Providential circumstances—it must be God's will. David knows, no matter how favorable the circumstances are, if your heart's not right with God, you can't go ahead. You've got to keep a right heart.

Saul totally misread God's will because, although the circumstances seemed right, his heart wasn't right. David read God's will because, although the circumstances seemed favorable, David knew it was wrong to go ahead. He let his life be monitored by the will of God. He did not do something and simply justify it on the basis of "God spoke to me." You can't always determine God's will by what appears to be a favorable circumstance. If your heart is not in the right place, you could start reading God's will wrongly.

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C. David kept in control because he left judgment to God. Saul goes out of the cave, and David comes out and calls to him, “I’ve got a piece of your robe, Saul. I could have killed you. But I won’t touch the Lord’s anointed. May the Lord judge between me and you on this matter.” He left the judgment to God. That’s not an easy thing in our life because we’d like to force circumstances to fit. We’re uncomfortable with loose needs—with ends in our life that we can’t immediately tie up. We’d like to cure all the ills in our life, all the problems in our life, and all the people who give us problems in our life. Sometimes, we have to let things just work out. And let God work them out. We can’t force them. It’s in God’s hands.

David has this recognition—it’s in God’s hands. “Saul, you put a big scar in my life. You’ve made my years of youth traumatic years. But I’m not going to let those years be ruined because of you. I’m not going to turn into a person I’m not because of you. I’m going to come out of this time stronger, healthier, and more vitally plugged into God than I’ve ever been. You will not take this time in my life and devastate me with it.” He did that by leaving it to God to sort everything out.

The story is told of a king who owned a beautiful, large diamond of which he was very proud. It was a diamond that had no equal anywhere in the world. But somehow, it sustained a deep scratch. The king called in his most skilled diamond cutters to see if they could, in some way, save the wholeness of the diamond and cure the defect. But all of them looked at it and said, “The only way to deal with the defect is to cut the diamond into smaller units. We can’t cure that defect.” Finally one of the diamond workers came in, and he told the king, “I can take the scar in the diamond and do something with it. I can make this diamond more beautiful than it ever was.” The king was impressed with the man’s confidence, as well as his apparent skill. He gave the diamond to him. The man proceeded to work on it. With superb artistry, he engraved a lovely

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rose into the diamond. And for the stem of the rose, he used the scratch. He transformed the marring into an instrument of beauty, which enhanced the diamond rather than diminished it.

One can imitate this craftsman. When life bruises and wounds you, you can use the scratches to etch a portrait of beauty and love. God is at work on the deep faults and the deep scratches of our life, if we leave the issues to Him to resolve. He'll work it for His glory.

D. Also, David kept control of himself because he had a forgiving heart. We touched this when we came to anger. But he really bore no malice toward Saul. Saul was always safe in David's hands. At the same time, David was not careless or passive. He took pains to make sure he was secure and away from Saul. Saul comes to know and even admit, "You're more righteous than I am. You treated me well. I treated you badly. David, you're going to be king some day. I know that now. Please take care of my family. Don't let anything happen to them when you become king." Saul is pleading because he knows the integrity of David, and he knows he can even trust the man he's made his enemy. He's able to trust him because David's kept a forgiving heart. I submit to you that Christianity is a lot of hard work. Grace is free, and it's through faith. All you've got to do to become a Christian is open your life to Jesus Christ and receive His forgiveness and His love. But one of the implications of being a Christian is you start walking with Christ. You take up the cross, and you follow Him. You don't take up the cross and do works in order to be saved. That's already a gift. But being a Christian is not something you can do as a passive floater. It requires the highest amount of energy and discipline you'll ever imagine in your life. Part of the high cost of being a Christian is Jesus Christ calling us to forgiveness. One of the hardest things we struggle with as human beings is to forgive. Not just once, but many times over. David sets the example for us in giving forgiveness regularly. He's

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healthy because of it. David kept forgiving Saul, but Saul never received his forgiveness. But David kept on forgiving him anyway.

From David and from David's son, the Lord Jesus, we learn we can survive tough moments in life if our heart will declare, "I forgive you." Christ did so on the cross. His whole world was seemingly out of control. He was stretched and nailed to the cross. Yet, his first words on the cross reflect his life instinct, "Father forgive."

How did David survive when life was difficult—when life was out of control? We have reviewed six things from these chapters—chapters 21–24. Let's put them to work in our own life. He did not go through his difficulty alone. He gathered others around him to comfort, encourage, and share life with him. Second, he did not become self-absorbed to the exclusion of taking care of his legitimate responsibilities. Third, he kept his heart open to God. Fourth, he did not demand being rewarded for doing the right thing. Fifth, he did not permit the negative actions, words of others, or unfavorable circumstances to define what he thought of himself or what God thought of him. Sixth, he did not lose control of himself. He kept self-control because he did not accumulate anger, he submitted his thoughts and his actions to the Lord, he left judgment to God, and he forgave.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we bring to You our own lives and our own moments where we have needed a special grace and help from You. We simply ask that Your will be done in our own lives. We thank You for the pattern the Scriptures give us to help us through those moments when we are lonely, when we are hurting, when we are hunted, when we are crushed, and when our emotions are so bruised that we hardly know what to do. You are there with us. Your promise is true. I will not leave you. I will not forsake you. Lord, let every person in this auditorium today know that word

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is not only true in general, but it is true for us as individuals. Help each one of us to live for You.

Help us to not let life's circumstances crush us, but help us to let them become the scar which

You make into the rose stem—a thing of beauty, a thing of strength, a thing of help. We ask

through Christ our Lord. Amen.