

David Spares Sha'ul's Life

First Samuel 24: 1-22

DIG: What brings Sha'ul to En Gedi? To this particular cave? Why does David cut off a corner of Sha'ul's robe? Why does he feel guilty about it? Why does David not kill Sha'ul? What pressures did he have that might have justified killing him? Why does David prostrate himself before Sha'ul? What kind of kingdom could David have ruled if he had gained the throne by bloodshed? Was Sha'ul's repentance sincere? Did David think so? What irony do you see in verses 21-22? How are their roles reversed?

REFLECT: Have you ever been talked into taking revenge on someone? If so, how did you feel afterwards? Is there an authority figure in your life that you have a difficult time submitting to? How would David act in your position? How is David a good example for our leaders and us? Are you as content as David seemed to be to simply let YHVH effect His will, His way, in His time? Or, are you likely to play Holy Spirit and "help God out" in some way? Can you think of an example? How can you tell if someone is sincere in wanting to "turn over a new leaf?" By your own standards, how do you do on that sincerity test? David returned good for evil. What are some opportunities you have to do this? Why is it so often so hard to do?

1013 BC

Chapters 24 and 26 are virtually mirror images of each other, beginning with Sha'ul's receiving a report about David's latest hiding place (24:1 and 26:1). Focusing David's refusal to lift a hand against Sha'ul, ADONAI's anointed (24:6, 10 and 26:11), and concluding with the words of a remorseful Sha'ul and his returning home from pursuing David (24:17-22 and 26:21, 25). The two chapters form a frame around the central Chapter 25, where the crude and ill-tempered Nabal functions as an alter ego of the rejected Sha'ul. Additionally, the divine protection that keeps David from shedding innocent blood runs as a unifying thread throughout all three chapters.¹³¹

The first time David spares Sha'ul's life: After Sha'ul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En-Gedi." So Sha'ul took three thousand able young men from all Isra'el and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the famous Wild Goats of En-Gedi. The reference to wild goats stresses the inaccessibility of the site. **The whole countryside is full of caverns that might have served as hiding places for David and his men** (First Samuel 24:1-2). The chase was on!

He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there. These were caves that had a stonewall at the entrance that provided protection for sheep. **And Sha'ul went in to relieve himself (First Samuel 24:3a).** The Torah was very strict when it came to matters of sanitation, especially in the army camp (**Deuteronomy 23:12-14**). Each soldier was required to leave the camp to relieve himself, and he had to carry a small shovel among his weapons so he could dig a hole to cover his feces. This meant that **Sha'ul** was away from the camp and would therefore be quite vulnerable. **He** naturally wanted privacy and felt that **he** was not in danger. The fact that **he** walked right into **David's** hiding place not only proved that **his** spies were incompetent, but also that **ADONAI** was still in control.¹³²

David and his men were far back in the darkest part of the very same cave, unbeknownst to **Sha'ul**. **Sha'ul** couldn't see **them**, but **they** could see **his** every move. Not all of **David's** four hundred **men** were in **the cave** because **he** had spread **them** out amongst the various **caves of En-Gedi**. **And David's men said: Look! The day has come that ADONAI told you about when he said to you, "I will turn your enemy over to you, and you will do to him whatever seems good to you."** But when did **God** say this? Were they referring to **Samuel's** words to **Sha'ul** in **First Samuel 15:26-29**, or to **YHVH's** message to **Samuel** in **First Samuel 16:1**? Perhaps the idea came from **Y'honatan's** words in **First Samuel 20:15**, which some of **the men** might have heard personally. It's likely that the leaders of the 600 **men** discussed these matters among themselves, for their future was wrapped up in **David's** future. They interpreted this as an opportunity to kill **Sha'ul**, but they obviously came to some false conclusions (**First Samuel 24:3b-4a**).¹³³ But **David** was too wise in the truth of **God's** Word to interpret this event as a signal for **him** to kill **Sha'ul** (see the commentary on **Exodus Dp - You Shall Not Murder**).

Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Sha'ul's robe. This would be tangible proof that **David** had the opportunity to kill **him**. But sometime **afterward**, **David** was **conscience-stricken** for having cut off a corner of his robe, which was an act of disrespect. Evidently **David's men** had asked **him**, "Why didn't you kill **Sha'ul** when you had the chance?" So **he** said to his men, "**ADONAI** forbid that **I** should [harm] my lord, **ADONAI's** anointed, as raise my hand against him! At this point **Sha'ul** is totally outside the will of **God** and in total rebellion against **God**. But since a prophet anointed **Sha'ul**, **YHVH** was **the One** who needed to deal with **him** and not **David**. **After all, he is the LORD's** anointed. By saying this, **David** stopped his men from any other criticism for his refusal to kill **Sha'ul** and would not let them do anything to **him**. **Sha'ul** got up, left the cave with his life intact and went on his way not realizing just how close **he** came to death (**First**

Samuel 24:4b-7 CJB).¹³⁴ This incident resulted in David writing Psalm 57 (see Bk - [When David Fled From Sha'ul into the Cave](#)).

David's Speech: Then David went out of the cave and called out to Sha'ul from a distance: "My lord the king," giving him the utmost respect. When Sha'ul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. David still respected Sha'ul's position as the king of Isra'el. He said to Sha'ul, "Why do you listen to men say, 'David is bent on harming you?' This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said: I will not lay my hand on my master because he is YHVH's anointed" (First Samuel 24:8-10).

Then David presented his proof that he had the opportunity to kill Sha'ul. See, my father (a term of respect, but reminding the king that he is, after all, Sha'ul's son-in-law), look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe (a symbol of God cutting the Kingdom from Sha'ul) but did not kill you. Continuing to protest his innocence, David reasons: See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. Unwilling to submit their dispute to human arbitration, David prays that the only fair and impartial Judge, Ha'Shem Himself may judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but no matter how many times I have the opportunity, my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, "From evildoers come evil deeds, so my hand will not touch you," which simply meant that if David was wicked (guilty) there would be evidence of his wickedness (First Samuel 24:11-13). Yeshua put it this way: **By their fruit you will recognize them** (Matthew 7:16a). But Sha'ul can cite no evidence. There is no guilty **fruit** from David's hand.

Then David showed how ridiculous Sha'ul's pursuit had been. **Against whom has the king of Isra'el come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?** The phrase **dead dog** was a humiliating term of reproach in those days (1 Samuel 17:43; 2 Samuel 3:8, 9:8, 16:9), so David was humbling himself before YHVH and the king. David closed his defense by saying: **May ADONAI consider my cause and uphold it; may He vindicate me by delivering me from your hand** (First Samuel 24:14-15). David was about 27 years old at this time.

Sha'ul's Confession and Request: Now Sha'ul must answer. When David finished saying this Sha'ul asked, "Is that your voice, David my son?" Sha'ul's heart was touched even though his mind was failing. **And he wept aloud** (First Samuel 24:16). He wept because he

must now face what he has long known. **He wept** because he must now confront the truth he has long avoided. **He** must acknowledge that **David** would be victorious, and not only that, but **he** must face the fact that **his** whole effort to be faithful, powerful or righteous, had failed. But the reality was that ultimately **he** failed because **YHVH** was with **David**.

Sha'ul was temporarily sorry for **his** actions, but **his** sorrow did not lead to repentance. **"You are more righteous than I,"** he said. The evidence was: **You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the LORD delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed?** This showed that **David** was not **Sha'ul's** enemy. **May YHVH reward you well for the way you treated me today (First Samuel 24:17-19).** This is the voice of a beaten man who wants out of the struggle.

Then surprisingly **Sha'ul** confessed that **he** knew **David** would be the next king. **I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Isra'el will be established in your hands.** Earlier **Samuel** had told **Sha'ul** that because of **his** rebellion against **God**, **his** "kingdom" would not endure but would be given to a man after the **LORD's** own heart (**First Samuel 13:14**). That was about thirty years earlier, and by this time **Sha'ul** had figured out that **David** would be **his** successor because **God** was with **him**. But even then **Sha'ul's** major concern was **his** own name and **descendants**, not the spiritual welfare of the people: **Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family.** How tragic it was that **Sha'ul's** own sins destroyed **his** family, all but **Y'honatan's** crippled son whom **David** took care of (see **Cz** - [David and Mephiboseth](#)).

David's response is brief and understated. **So David gave his oath to Sha'ul.** The narrator does not elaborate. **Then Sha'ul, having secured the promise he needed, returned home to Gibeah. He had gotten from David all he could expect to receive.¹³⁵ However David and his men went up to the stronghold at Masada (First Samuel 24:20-22).** Despite **his** emotional tears and speech, **Sha'ul** would soon take up the chase again.

David's decision not to kill **Sha'ul** when **he** had the chance was one of the highest spiritual pinnacles of **his** entire life. **He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city (Proverbs 16:32 NKJV).** What a difference it made to **his** future that **David** honored **ADONAI** during **his** time of trial. And how important is it for us that we pass the tests of faith that **God** sets before us, for in many cases our future testimony and the effectiveness of our ministry may be on the line.¹³⁶