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Sha’ul Pursues David
First Samuel 23: 7-29

DIG: By the time Sha’ul decided to attack Keilah, he had completely lost perspective and was abusing his authority. How did Sha’ul get to that point? Why was Sha’ul so pleased to hear that David was held up in Keilah? What are the citizens of Keilah like? What do you learn about God from His responses to David? From His control of circumstances? What are David’s motives in leaving Keilah? What did that decision say about him? How did Y’honatan help David find strength in YHVH? What does that say about Y’honatan? What motivated the Ziphites to come to Sha’ul? What was ironic about the Ziphites being concerned about Sha’ul?

REFLECT: What distinguishes those who are “driven” as Sha’ul obviously was? Do you have any of Sha’ul’s explosive anger, paralyzing self-pity or compulsive behavior? Who has helped you find strength in the Lord? How so? How have you or could you help a friend of yours find strength in God? Pick one tough situation facing you right now. How is YHVH in control of that? If you are “on the run” in any way, how does ADONAI fit into your flight pattern? Who can encourage you right now?

1013 BC



It does not surprise us any longer that **David** must flee for **his l**ife. Nor does it

surprise us that **Sha'ul** will desperately pursue **him** in order to kill **him**. **Sha'ul** would pursue **David** until **he** takes his own life (**to see link click Bw – Sha'ul Takes His Own Life**). Indeed, **Sha'ul** now has no other purpose other than killing **David**. But it is an unequal contest between the pursuer and the one pursued, more unequal than **Sha'ul** could ever know. Unlike **Sha'ul**, **David** doesn't travel alone. **He** travels with adoring friends and loyal followers. **He** travels with **Abiathar the priest**, **Gad the prophet,** and divine approval. Indeed, **David** travels with the resolve of the narrator that the story will not end until **David** is settled, safe, and on the throne.[110]

The Betrayal by Keilah: Sha'ul was told that David had gone to Keilah, and he said, "God has delivered him into my hands for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars." It would be easier to capture David in a city than by attempting to track him down in the hill-country of Judah, where he would have the advantage of familiarity with every detail of the country. But **Sha'ul** was only fooling **himself**. **And Sha'ul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.** Having an efficient spy system, **when David learned that Sha'ul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring me the ephod** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fz – Make the Ephod of Gold, Blue, Purple and Scarlet Yarn**) with the Urim and Thummim (see the commentary on **Exodus Gb – The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**) in it." While **Sha'ul** was mobilizing **his** army, **his** plans were somehow leaked to **David**. **David** had to be very careful what **he** did and where **he** went. There might be another Doeg lurking in the shadows.

Then **David** said: **ADONAI, God of Isra'el, your servant has heard that Sha'ul definitely plans to come to Keilah and destroy the city on account of me. He** already knows what **Sha'ul** did to the city of Nov, what would **he** do to **the city** of **Keilah**? So **David** asked two questions of **YHVH**: **Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Sha'ul come down, as your servant has heard? LORD, God of Isra'el, tell Your servant.** But the Urim and the Thummim could only answer one question at a time with a yes or no answer, and if two questions were asked, **God** would only answer the last question asked. So **YHVH answered** the second question with one Hebrew word: **He will.** So **again David** asked **his** first question that wasn't answered previously: **Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Sha'ul? And ADONAI** again answered in one Hebrew word: **They will. They** betrayed **David** to save **themselves** because **they**

feared that what **Sha'ul** did to the people of Nov **he** would do to them.[111] **So David and his men,** which had grown to **about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place.** It was during this time that **David** wrote **Psalm 63** (See **Bh – When David Was in the Desert of Y'hudah**)**. When Sha'ul was told David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there (First Samuel 23:13).**

Like **David**, when we make a habit of carefully consulting **the Lord**, not only are we enriched through **God's Word**, but we are also rescued from all kinds of dangers. **It** does not restrict us, but protects us. Consider the sexual sins of our day. Despite all the temptations we face, the Bible teaches us to flee from sexual immorality (see the commentary on **Exodus Dq – You Shall Not Commit Adultery**). By following this counsel, believers are spared from many woes. **God's Word** rescues us from this danger.[112] **Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).**

Y'honatan Visits David for the Last Time: Inserted in the middle of "the great chase," is **Y'honatan's** final appearance in **David's** life. **Y'honatan's** intervention proved to be a turning point for **his** friend. **David** was **afraid** because **Sha'ul** came out to **take his life**. Therefore, **he stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph,** a desolate hilly and wooded area between Hebron and the Dead Sea, 2,900 feet above sea level. It was a very strategic vantage point to be able to see troop movements from all directions. **Day after day Sha'ul searched for him, but YHVH did not give David into his hands. While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Sha'ul had come out to take his life.** The narrator tells us the meaning of this cat-and-mouse game. The escape does not mean that **David** was faster or more clever than **Sha'ul**. No, the escape was possible only because **YHVH** intervened. The various episodes in the chase between **David** and **Sha'ul** simply play out the overriding reality of the sovereignty of **God**, which neither **Sha'ul** nor **David** could change.[113]

And Sha'ul's son Y'honatan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in Elohim because **the prince** knew **David** had **God's** favor**. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Sha'ul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Isra'el, and I will be second to you." Y'honatan,** a spiritual man, has no trouble submitting to what **he knows** is **God's** will. But **he** does not know that **he** will die before **David** becomes **king**. "**Even my father Sha'ul knows**

this.” This is an important admission, even if we do not have the actual concession speech from **Sha’ul**. **He knows**, but **he** cannot yet publicly concede. More than that, **Sha’ul knows** but **he** cannot admit it to **himself**. **Sha’ul knows**, but **he** must keep up appearances for the sake of **his** reputation, even **his** very own identity. **Sha’ul** knows, but **he** does not yet know that **he** knows, and so **his son Y’honatan knows** on **his** behalf.[114]

Unlike **his son, Sha’ul** will not submit to **God’s** will. **The two of them made a covenant before ADONAI. Y’honatan** had said **his** piece, then **he went home.** In the meantime the chase must continue, **then David remained at Horesh (First Samuel 23:14-18). Proverbs 18:24 says: One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother,** and **Y’honatan** was that **friend** to **David**. True **friends** help you **find strength** in **God** during the low points of life.

The First Betrayal by the Ziphites: Back to the chase. **The Ziphites went up to Sha’ul at his** palace at **Gibeah.** This is the first of two times that **the Ziphites** would betray **David**. This was a betrayal because **the Ziphites** were **Judeans** and were from the same tribe as **David**, but remained loyal to **Sha’ul**. No doubt **they** hoped to profit in some way from **their** betrayal of **David’s** position. Opposed to the citizens of Keilah, who were passive and would only turn **David** over to **Sha’ul** to save themselves, **the Ziphites** were aggressive, initiating the betrayal. **David’s** assessment of **them** was that they were **violent men are seeking my life; they give no thought to YHVH. Their** thinking was that since **David** did not save **them** from anything, **they** didn’t owe **him** anything. **And** not wanting to become another Nov, **they** said: **Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hakilah, south of Jeshimon? Now, Your Majesty, come down whenever it pleases you to do so, and we will be responsible for giving him into your hands (First Samuel 23:19-20).**[115]

Sha’ul replied: May **ADONAI bless you for your concern for me.** But **he** wanted to avoid going on a wild-goose chase so **he** said: **Go and get more information. Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty** (Hebrew: *arum*), the same word that was used of the Adversary in **Genesis 3:1**, a point which would not have been lost on a Jewish audience**. Find out about all the hiding places he uses and come back to me with definite information. Then I will go with you; if he is in the area, I will track him down among all the clans of Y’hudah. So they set out and went to Ziph ahead of Sha’ul (First Samuel 23:21-24a).** It was during

this time that **David** wrote **Psalm 54** (see **Bi – When the Ziphites Had Gone to Sha’ul**).

The Desert of Ma’on: **Now David and his men were in the Desert of Ma’on,** ten miles southeast of Hebron, **in the Arabah south of Jeshimon. Sha’ul and his men began the search, and when David was told about it, he went down to the rock and stayed in the Desert of Ma’on.** Eventually, **Sha’ul** tracked **David** down on a particular hill, identified by **rocks** that made it a landmark. **When Sha’ul heard this, he went to the Desert of Ma’on in pursuit of David. Sha’ul was going along one side of the mountain, and David and his men were on the other side, hurrying to get away from Sha’ul.** At the last minute **David** found that his trust in **ADONAI** had not been misplaced. A **Philistine** raid demanded **Sha’ul’s** attention. **His** personal feud must give way to national security, so **David**, at about the age of 27, was rescued solely because **YHVH** had intervened.[116] **As Sha’ul and his forces were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Sha’ul saying, “Come quickly! The Philistines are raiding the land.”** It is always **the Philistines**! **Then Sha’ul broke off his pursuit of David and went to meet the Philistines. Sha’ul** turned from **David**, one of **his** long-term preoccupations, to **the Philistines, his** other enduring project.[117] **God** had used the distraction of **the Philistines** to rescue **David** from the tentacles of **Sha’ul**.

David continued to hide in **the rocks**. **He** may eventually be **King of Isra’el**, but for now **he** is a fugitive from **Sha’ul**. **He** is in serious danger and has little maneuverability. To commemorate this great escape, the Jews called the **place Sela Hammahlekoth,** or **the rock of divisions** because the two armies were divided as **Sha’ul** abandoned **his** pursuit of **David.** The Hebrew carries the idea of “a smooth rock” and therefore “a slippery rock,” in other words, “the rock of slipping away.”[118] **And David** quickly **went up from the Desert of Ma’on and lived in the strongholds of En-Gedi**, an oasis ten miles north of Masada on the Dead Sea **(First Samuel 23:24b-29).** The chase would be continued from there.

Scripture tells us that **there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 19:24)**, and the ultimate example of that is **the Son of God**, who willingly died to free us from our sins. Like **Y’honatan**, **Yeshua** came from a place of safety into our world of hardship and danger. Like **Y’honatan**, **Messiah** remembered our need and, reflecting on our misery, brought words of salvation. Indeed, if we find ourselves in need with no **Y’honatan** to come alongside, we may

turn to **Jesus** and find **a friend** who is able to **sympathize with our weaknesses** and offer **grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).**

Many heroes of the faith have found **Christ** to be the best of **friends**. Andrew Bonar, minister of the free church in Scotland in the 1800s, wrote in his journal of a certain wood where he would go to be strengthened through fellowship in prayer with **Christ**. He named it his “Wood of Ziph.” He recorded, “**God** has often strengthened my hands, my divine **Y’honatan** meeting me there.” Jonathan Edwards, whose preaching started the Great Awakening during the colonial period, on his deathbed likewise called out for “**Jesus of Nazareth**, my true and never-failing friend.” Rabbi Sha’ul said the same of his trial before Caesar: **No one came to stand by me, but all deserted me – but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me (First Timothy 4:16-17).**

Not only does **Yeshua** strengthen our hand to believe in **YHVH**, but **He** is also the way to **God’s** love, atoning for our sins with **His** own blood. **Messiah** says to us: **I will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5**, quoting **Joshua 1:5).** Consequently, we persevere by leaning our souls upon His saving grace. And we serve **the Lord** well when we stand by our friends, speak to them the words that strengthen faith, and, in **Christ’s** name, share in their troubles and sorrows. **Jesus** said of **Himself**: **Greater love has no one than this,that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).** If we will be true friends to fellow believers and reach out to unbelievers, then something like that may be said of us. **Christ** will use our ministry to strengthen the hands and hearts of many to persevere until the day when **He** returns and **His** Kingdom is ushered in.[119]