

“I Don’t Know”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2021 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

God is still creating beauty during our seasons of chaos and uncertainty.

1 Samuel 27

November 7, 2021

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

God’s own choosing

The older I get, the easier it is to say, “I don’t know.” As I learn more, I find out there’s more to learn. In 1 Samuel 27, we come to a season in David’s life where he says, “I don’t know.” For good reason. Let’s review what brought us here.

1 Samuel begins with Samuel’s mother, Hannah, who desperately wants a child. Samuel is the answer to her prayers. He grows up and becomes Israel’s last “judge” and first “prophet.” The people renew their covenant with God under Samuel and beat back their perpetual coastal nemesis, the Philistines.

For the people, though, Samuel’s not enough. They want “a king like all the other nations have.” They get one – Saul, who is even more kingly than all the kings of the other nations. Humble at first, he becomes arrogant as he wins all his battles.

All this is God’s setup for David. 1 Samuel 16:13 is often quoted as the reason – “The LORD has sought a man after his own heart.” That’s probably a bad translation. Better: “a man of God’s own heart” – that is, a leader of God’s own choosing. The point is not David’s heart. It’s God’s heart that chooses David.

David is adored by all Israel, most notably Saul’s son Jonathan, after he kills Goliath. At first even Saul loves David. But when he realizes David is to replace him as king, insecurity and fear possess Saul. He tries to kill David in his own palace, then chases him into the desert where David assembles a small army of debtors and

discontents. Saul murders 85 priests with their families and neighbors for harboring David. He annuls the marriage of David to his daughter – giving Michal to another man.

In the story from last Sunday David has a golden opportunity to kill Saul in the cave, but refuses because Saul is “God’s anointed.” As the next chapter opens, the aged Samuel, who has largely disappeared from the story, dies. As long as Samuel was alive, David or Saul could ask what God wants of them. Now when they need spiritual answers, they’re going to be on their own or just say, *I don’t know*.

As David retreats further south away from Saul, he encounters a wealthy man named Nabal whose flocks David has previously protected. David asks for a return favor to feed his men, but Nabal is a despicable man who answers harshly. Angered, David takes 400 of his men to attack Nabal and his men, but he is intercepted by Nabal’s beautiful and grace-filled wife. Abigail says, “David, one day you’re going to be king, and you don’t want this massacre on your conscience or your record.” David listens, thanks her, and withdraws his threat. Ten days later, “The LORD struck Nabal and he died” (25:38). David marries Abigail. He had previously married another woman, Ahinoam.

Saul again learns where David is, and remobilizes his elite army of 3,000 to track David down. Once again David gets a golden opportunity to kill Saul, but he won’t do it. He also stays the hand of Abishai, who’s with him. What David says at that point is important. “The LORD himself will strike him; either his time will come or he will die in battle.” (26:10). When Saul wakes up and realizes David could have killed him again, he says, “I have sinned. I will not try to kill you again” (26:21). Do you believe Saul this time? David doesn’t.

A David we don’t like

We now come to chapter 27, where we meet a David we don’t like. We’ve seen David fight lions and bears, a giant and other Philistines, all in the name of the LORD. He’s written psalms of praise and trust when Saul hunted him like prey. He has restrained his hand – not once but twice – to honor Saul as “the LORD’s anointed.” So far, we like David. But not in chapter 27. There is no mention of God in this chapter – no evidence that David sought God, prayed to God, or did what he did for God’s honor. In the book of Psalms, we have no songs written by David during these sixteen months. There are at least three reasons we can judge David as an unworthy future king.

First, he runs (1-4). He’s been told by Samuel, Jonathan, Abigail, and even Saul that he will be king. He loses sight of that promise as our chapter opens: “One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul,” he says (1). David leaves Saul’s

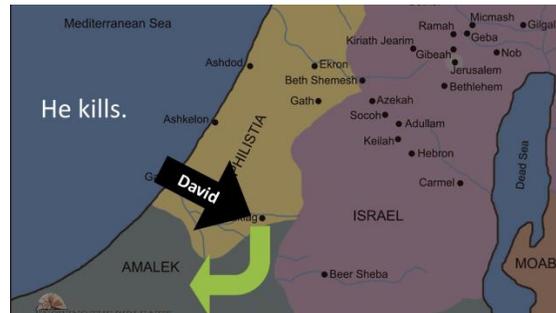


kingdom of Israel – quite literally “God’s country” – crossing the border into Philistine territory.

Of all places, he defects to Gath – the hometown of Goliath – and takes refuge under the Philistine King Achish (2). With him is his growing family, all 600 of his warriors, and their families as well (3). Saul has never started wars with the Philistines – only fought back when they attacked him. He won’t chase David across the border (4).

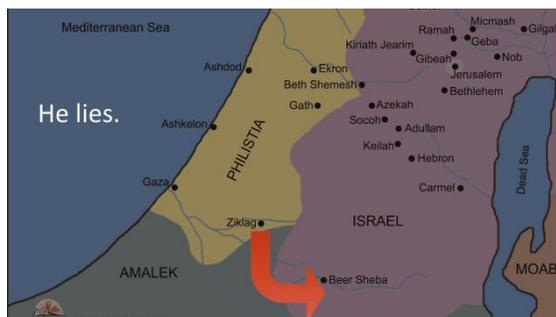
David’s strategy works, but at what price? He is safe for now, but he has sought refuge with Israel’s idol-worshiping archenemy!

Second, he kills (5-9). David asks Achish to resettle him in a rural village to the south of Philistia, called Ziklag (5-6). His small tribe of at least 2,000 or so (including women and children) remains there for sixteen months (7). Watch what happens next.



Do you remember how we called Saul a murderous monster for killing the priests and their families and neighbors? David raids small towns to the south (8), kills every human in each town, and claims their livestock, camels, and clothes for plunder. He reports to Achish, probably bringing part of the spoils as payment for allowing him to live in Ziklag (9).

Third, he lies. When he reports to Achish about his raids, he doesn’t admit he has been raiding in Amalek. He says he has been looting towns in the south of Judah (10), in Saul’s kingdom. We now learn that one of the reasons David killed every single human in the Amalekite towns is because any survivor would tattle on him to Achish (11). So the Amalekites all have to die, every single person.



The strategy of deceit is also successful. Achish believes David. He trusts David. He believes David is fighting with him against his enemy, Saul. He thinks David is now not only Saul’s enemy, but he has become “obnoxious to his people,” the Israelites. He thinks David is now his “servant for life” (12).

David runs, he kills, he lies. This is our future king, the one of God’s own choosing? This is certainly one way to read 1 Samuel 27. It’s not the only way.

Another angle

It might help to read ahead a bit. In the next chapter, Achish decides to resume the strategy of attacking Israel. It's never worked for the Philistines before, but with David as an ally, who knows? He tells David, "You owe me" (28:1). David has obligated himself to take his entire fighting force (2).

We don't know what would have happened, but Achish's generals don't like having David in the rear. He might trust David, but they don't. They fear their army will be trapped between Saul and David if he turns on them. Achish sends David home.

When David and his fighting men return to Ziklag, the whole town has gone up in smoke (30:1-2). The Amalekites have taken their revenge. They didn't kill the wives and children, but they kidnapped every one of them before burning the town to the ground. David's men are so enraged they threaten to kill him.

Now the text says, "David found strength in the LORD his God" (6). He seeks God's direction through the priest (7), and is given the green light to pursue the raiders (8). They find an informant (13-14) who leads them to the Amalekite raiding party and David brings everyone and everything back home safely (19-20).

What's more, David shares the Amalekite plunder with some of his friends in Judah. There's enough to spread among at least fourteen towns in the southern area (27-31). David is gaining the loyalty of those whose support he will need to become king after Saul is dead.

Our narrator in 1 Samuel wants us to know this story turned out just fine. While chapter 27 doesn't explicitly mention God directing David, it also implies David did anything wrong. God doesn't abandon the man of his own choosing. Maybe we don't have any psalms that were preserved for us while David was living in Ziklag, but the whole town was burned while he was away!

I don't know whether David was doing all the right things in chapter 27, but there's definitely another way to look at the story. You may remember that Kevin said last week when David declined to kill Saul in the cave, "For God's sake, do nothing." There are times to wait. Maybe David is thinking, *I don't know*.

There are justifiable reasons for his actions. One is *survival*. Go back further in the story. When Saul threw a spear at him – twice if not three times – nobody thought David should stand still and say, "Saul, God's going to protect me. Throw that thing again. I bet it will miss."

A second reason David acts as he does is *protection*. David also can't hide in caves and run around the desert when he and his men have families to protect and provide for. Two or three thousand people – two-thirds of them women and teens and

toddlers and babies – are going to be no match for 3,000 Saul’s Army rangers. David can’t get them all out of harm’s way if he remains within Saul’s kingdom.

A third reason is war. No, in most cases we can’t justify killing or lying. But this story takes place in the context of a multi-generational conflict between Israel and Philistia. We can actually see David as cleverly acting in the best short-term and long-term interests of his people – all the while completely deceiving Achish.

But he didn’t kill Philistines, right? He killed Amalekites. That’s the story of an even longer war. The Amalekites had been enemies of Israel for centuries. The first people to attack Israel when they came through the Red Sea were Amalekites (Exodus 17). Moses had said to Joshua, “Be sure and exterminate the Amalekites (Deuteronomy 25). During the era of the judges, the Amalekites frequently attacked the Israelites (Judges 3,5,6,7). We might not like the concept of holy war in the Bible (that’s another sermon), but David is apparently trying to complete what God had started centuries earlier.

David is the king of God’s own choosing. The road to his throne is messy, but David for his part is being shrewd, politically smart, and even aggressive toward the right people – meaning not his own king and not his own people. It works out for David – because he’s not in charge of the big picture. God is – whether or not David at the moment is aware of that fact.

One thing I desire

Would I do what David did if I lived in his era, if I carried his weight of responsibility, if I were the very hinge of history? *I don’t know. I don’t know* in part because *I don’t know* if what he did was right. Also, *I don’t know* because *I don’t know* if I would have the courage and cunning required to do what he did.

Last night, I finished reading Dr. Curt Thompson’s new book, *The Soul of Desire*. Curt says our basic human desires – to be seen, soothed, safe, and secure – are not only normal, but those longings drive us to create beauty. To be sure, they also have great potential to create chaos, but God’s way is to create beauty from chaos. Whatever else David is doing, and whether he’s doing it right or wrong – David and his men are longing to be seen, soothed, safe, and secure. Even when they don’t know.

Curt’s book points to the work of artist Mokoto Fujimura, who uses a traditional Japanese art form called *nihonga*. Pigments for painting are created from pulverized minerals and precious metals – gold, silver, ruby, malachite, oyster shell. The process requires patience as the layers dry. The result is a beauty that refracts light in different ways from different angles.

It’s hard to see beauty when it feels like we’re being pulverized. But God is still creating beauty during our seasons of chaos and uncertainty.

The verse Curt uses as a basis for his book is Psalm 27:4 –

*One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.*

Psalm 27 is a psalm of David. I can't prove that he wrote it in Ziklag. It's no wonder we don't have anything from his time there, because the Great Fire of Ziklag consumed everything. But I can well imagine that when David was out of his country he was not only longing for home, he was longing for worship with his people. All his life he longed for the temple of beauty his son would eventually build.

We may not have recorded prayers from David definitely connected to this time, but prayer was David's go-to and I'm not buying that he was prayer-less for sixteen months. He prayed when he was mad or sad or glad or bad. He prayed when he was afraid, when he was indecisive, when he was successful, when he miserably failed. He prayed when the only thing he knew to pray was *I don't know*.

In Psalm 27, David was facing enemies. In that situation, David longed to gaze on the beauty of the Lord. It was the one thing he asked of God. What was hard to see at the moment was that the chaos of confronting wickedness and facing enemies was how God was creating the beauty his own story would become.

This is our hope. Our beautiful God created beauty when he created us. He's still working on it when we're sighing or shouting, I don't know. And he will finish the painting he started (Philippians 1:6).

When we say, *I don't know*, we can simultaneously thank God for his grace. This side of the cross we hear with clarity God's "I know." "I know you," the Father says. "You are my beautiful painting. I know your story, I know your pain, I know your heart."

"I know you," the Spirit says. "I know your confusion, and I will direct you. I know your longings, and I will comfort you. I know your sins and I will convict you."

"I know you," Jesus says. "I know your temptations, and I've faced them myself. I know your failures, and I have paid their price. When you are thinking, *I don't know*, please know this: I know your destiny, that in eternity you will be the beauty I designed.

I love how David's story brings us to the table of the Lord. Here we own all *our I don't knows* as well as all of our "I do know how far I have fallen short." Here we are so very free to be ourselves – not only our deeply valued selves but our deeply flawed selves. Here we confess, here we repent, here we believe. Here we look down the pew not with condescension but with humility. Here we expose our hearts not with shame but with complete freedom, because Jesus paid it all. Amen.