

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for October 26: Conform to God's agenda

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I recall having read at some time a devotional thought—the name of the author has left me—based on the character of Enoch, who according to Genesis 5:22-24, “walked with God.” That devotional writer explored some of the facets of that statement, and noted that walking with God means that one shares God’s company, moves at God’s pace and arrives at God’s destination.

A similar verbal template might be laid over the theme of this week’s lesson, which is “Conforming to God’s Agenda.” Conforming to God’s agenda means—among other things—that we work toward God’s goals, limit ourselves to God’s methods, and operate according to God’s timetable. All three of those components are vital to the equation; leave one out, and the whole thing falls apart. It ceases to be God’s agenda, and becomes our own.

It isn’t difficult to see how these three factors come into play in our focal text of 1 Samuel 24. In the events described in this chapter, we see that David was committed to God’s agenda: He had God’s goal (establishing him as the king of Israel) in mind, but also he limited himself to God’s methods and waited on God’s timing for his kingship to begin.

Let’s look at how it all happened.

Last week, we examined the friendship of Jonathan and David. We saw how Jonathan’s love for David motivated him to defend David against the violent

paranoia of Jonathan's father, Saul, who was convinced the young man posed a threat to his position as king of Israel. For a time, Jonathan was able to keep David safe, but finally the situation worsened to the point that David had to flee from Saul and go into hiding (chapter 20).

Saul was determined to find David and kill him, so David became a fugitive, constantly moving from place to place, always staying just a step or two ahead of Saul and his army. David was joined in his flight by a rag-tag band of men who followed and supported him (22:2).

On the occasion described in chapter 24, Saul's spies had informed him David was hiding with his men in the desert of En Gedi. That region contains extensive rocky gorges pockmarked with numerous small caves and was a natural location for David to conceal himself and his men. Acting on the lead from his informant, Saul tracked David to the area known as the "Crag of the Wild Goats" (v. 2).

There is something almost comic about the scene described in verse 3: Saul went into one of the caves to answer the call of nature, not realizing David and his men were hiding in the inner recesses of that very cave. In his privacy and position of vulnerability, Saul made himself an easy target. David had the perfect opportunity to kill Saul, and some of his men encouraged David to take Saul's life and be done with it (v. 4).

David might even have entertained such thoughts himself as he crept forward in the darkness, unseen, toward the unprotected and unsuspecting Saul. But rather than plunging his knife into Saul's back, David contented himself with cutting off a piece of the corner of the king's robe and then silently retreating back into the darkness.

Verse 5 tells us that shortly afterward, though, David's conscience troubled him because of what he had done. Let's put a mental bookmark for the time being at that part of the story, because we will come back to it in just a bit.

After Saul had left the cave (and, we may presume, was a safe distance away), David yelled to get the king's attention and informed him about how close his brush with death had been (vv. 8-11). He even showed Saul the corner of the robe which he had sliced off in the cave (and we can imagine Saul then quickly grabbing the tail of his robe and examining it in horror). David reminded Saul he had done nothing to deserve being treated as an outlaw, and his refusal to harm Saul when he had the opportunity was Exhibit A of his innocence.

Saul admitted David's blamelessness and his own guilt in this matter (though not for the last time, as this scene will be repeated in chapter 26). The king went back home, but David prudently chose to remain in his desert stronghold (v. 22).

Let's go back now to that spot where we placed our mental bookmark—David's remorse over his decision to cut the corner off Saul's robe in the cave (vv. 5-6). We might be curious about why the mere action of ruining Saul's clothing bothered David as much as it did, especially when you consider that this appeared to be an act of mercy (cutting his robe instead of cutting Saul).

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that what David did was—to use the vernacular of clinical psychology—a “passive-aggressive” act which did no physical harm but which still sent a hostile message. The robe Saul wore represented the authority of his kingdom, much like a policeman's uniform and badge represent his authority to enforce the law. By cutting off a piece of Saul's robe, David was dishonoring the Lord's anointed by defacing the symbol of his kingship.

David's claiming as his own a piece of Saul's robe might even be construed as his backhanded way of saying to the king, “I own you.” Perhaps through this act, he was sending the message to Saul that it was just a matter of time before he, David, would possess the kingdom.

Even if David did not realize at the time the symbolic enormity of his action, when he did consider the implications of what he had done, he was filled with regret.

David's act, and his remorse afterward, challenge us to examine our words and actions and to consider if they contain any hostile messages, even though those words and actions might not be overtly violent. David's prayer of Psalm 139 is appropriate for us to pray as well: "Search me, O God, and know my heart ... and see if there be any hurtful way in me ..." (Psalm 139:23-24).

Once again, David demonstrated the sort of qualities which led God to call him a man after his own heart. Vengeance for Saul's crimes against David would come some day, but that was God's business—not his—and David was content to leave his case in God's hands (vv. 12-15). Furthermore, David knew he had been chosen by God to replace Saul on the throne of Israel, but he was willing to leave the timing of his elevation to the Lord. He would not use ungodly methods to accomplish the goal that God had revealed was to take place.

David was committed to God's agenda, not merely in pursuing the right goals, but—just as importantly—pursuing them in the right way.

The chapter holds up a mirror to us and invites us to do some honest self-evaluation. And this is the question which David's actions encourage us to ask: Are we on God's agenda—or our own, cleverly disguised as God's?