

The Obedient Heart

If God wanted to teach you obedience, where and when do you think he might choose to do it? Do you think it might be when everything in your life is going well? Would it be when you had plenty of money, plenty of food and drink, plenty of friends and when you didn't have any troubles? Would it be when your marriage relationship was perfect, when your job was easy and when you were feeling spiritually buoyant? Do you think that when life was like that you would listen? Read the Bible and you will see that the times of greatest training in obedience and trust for the big people of God, were times that they spent in a desert.

Wilderness Training.

Abraham had a wilderness experience. He wandered as a nomad in a land that never belonged to him, and that experience matured his faith in God. Moses had a wilderness experience that lasted 40 years. Elijah, Israel's greatest prophet, learned his most important lessons in the wilderness. Jesus had a wilderness experience that inaugurated his ministry. David spent ten years in the wilderness before he became King. If you are in a wilderness right now, then you are in good company. You are in the company of Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, and Jesus. You are in a place where God shapes people for service in his Kingdom.

There are two incidents from David's time in the wilderness that teach us about obedience. I don't have time to read all of 1 Samuel 24 today, so I'm going to give you the background and then read a part of the story. David was in the wilderness in the region of the Dead Sea. It's a hot, dry place. At this time of the year the average temperature is about 40 degrees Celsius. The ancient fortress of Masada is in this region, which is the hottest place I have been in my life. At the top of Masada it was 50 degrees. This was the region where David was running from the 3000 soldiers of King Saul. David was on the run, hiding in caves, with 600 motley deserters with him. He was vastly outnumbered.

“After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, “David is in the Desert of En Gedi. ” So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats. He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. The men 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 deal with as you wish.’” (1 Samuel 24:1-4 NIV)

Your Enemy At Your Feet.

This is a situation every soldier dreams of. The commander of the enemy army, is on his own in a cave with his pants down. All David needs to do is creep up behind him and stick a dagger into him, and all his troubles are over. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. Urged on by his men, David creeps up behind Saul, pulls out his knife, but instead of sticking it into Saul, he cuts off a bit of the royal robe, and let's him go. David's men can't believe what he has done. This was his opportunity to finish Saul for good, and he blew it. All he has is a piece of the Kings robe.

Read a couple of chapters further on and you find a similar situation. David and one of his soldiers sneak into the enemy camp and get right to the place where King Saul is sleeping. His spear is stuck in the ground right next to his head. This is the same spear that Saul has been throwing at David for years. All he has to do is lift it and stick it through King Saul's body, and all his troubles are over.

The Weapon In Your Hand.

Have you ever found yourself in that situation? The person that has been making your life a misery for so long is right there before you, completely at your mercy. The spear or the dagger in your hand is information that would destroy their career. The weapon in your hand is a wrong that they have done to you in the past, and now the opportunity is before you to use it against them. It will only take one word

spoken to the right person, and they are finished. This is the person who has been trying to destroy you. This is your spear thrower. This is the father who has abused you all your childhood. This is the boss who has denied you promotion. This is the person who cheated you out of all that money. This is the husband or the wife who ran off with someone else, leaving you with the children and no money. Now your moment has come. In your hand is the dagger of vengeance. In your hand is the spear of revenge. This is the moment for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. What are you going to do? David even had his friends quoting scripture to him, telling him that killing Saul is what the Lord would have him do. Let's read some more of David.

“Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. He said to his men, “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord.” With these words David sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way.” (1 Samuel 24:5-7 NIV)

Seeing The Bigger Picture.

This is not about courage. On one of these occasions the King is surrounded by 3000 soldiers, and David has crept right past them. It's not as though David is freezing up with fear at the last moment. It's not about consequences either. It's not as if David thought “if I kill the King I'll have the whole of his army breathing down my neck. He has 3000 soldiers and I only have 600.” There is something much bigger than courage or consequences going on here. David sees a much bigger picture. This is not between him and Saul, or between his army and Saul's army. This is between David and God.

The Voices That Call Us To Disobey God.

There is a voice inside David that says “Just do it. It would be so easy. It will fix your problem quickly. Just stick the knife in and you will feel so much better.” But it's not just the inside voice. There are outside voices too. The voices of his friends are whispering in his ear “This is what God wants for you. God promised you this. You deserve it. Saul has been nothing but trouble for you and now God has made it possible for you to get even”. Do you recognise those voices? The voices inside us and the voices outside us that urge us to take revenge? The voices that say “Don't forgive”. The voices that say “God's way is too hard.” The voices that say “Hold on to that resentment and bitterness for a little bit longer.” The voices that say “Everyone else is doing it, why don't you do it this way?”

Jesus knew those voices that called him from the path of obedience. He spent 40 days in his wilderness. He heard voices too. “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.” “If you bow down and worship me, I'll give you all the kingdoms of this world.” After telling his disciples that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he would be killed, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. It was the voice of a friend, but Jesus knew where that voice was coming from. His response was “Get behind me Satan!” Some of the voices that call us away from obedience to God are voices of people very close to us.

Inheriting The Kingdom God's Way.

People, the battle we are engaged in isn't a battle with the people who have used us and abused us. Our battle isn't with the King Saul's who have been throwing spears at us. The voices we hear originate from the evil one, who calls us to stop trusting God and to trust our own wisdom. If David had put a dagger into King Saul in the cave, or if he had put a spear through him while he was sleeping, the Kingdom would have been his. But he wouldn't have become King the way God wanted. It wouldn't have been God's timing. When you and I hear a voice that says “retaliate”, you can be sure that it's a test of our obedience to God. When Satan tested Jesus in his wilderness experience, he was offering Jesus the Kingdoms of this world. But the price was that Jesus would bow down and worship him. Satan was offering David the Kingdom of Israel, but the price of that Kingdom would have been a broken

relationship with God. When we use a spear or a dagger to do it our way, there is a price to pay. The price is nothing less than our relationship with God.

Do You Believe God Is In Control?

So what was it that stopped David from killing Saul and taking over the Kingdom? Deep within David was an unshakeable belief that God was in control. Even though he had been anointed as the future King of Israel, David still believed that Saul was God's anointed King. David had a clear sense of what was God's role and what was his role. God would remove Saul in God's way and in God's time. Of course David wanted to be King, but he refused to try and fulfill God's promise through his own disobedience. He was determined that when he sat on the throne of Israel, it wouldn't be because he got Saul out of the way, but because God got Saul out of the way. He wanted God's fingerprints on that work, not his own, and he wanted the clean conscience that comes from knowing it was God's work. The test of whether we really believe God is in control is when we have the means to destroy our enemies.

Ruining The Robe.

Now you may be thinking, "OK, I won't put the dagger or the spear into my Saul. But surely I can do what David did, and cut off a piece of his robe. Surely I can show him that I have had the power to do him some damage. Surely I can humiliate him a little." The problem with cutting off a piece of the robe of your Saul is that it might make you feel good, but it doesn't do your relationship with God any good. David had a tremendous respect for the God who had appointed Saul even if he didn't have much respect for the king himself. No matter how low Saul stooped, he was still the king and should be respected. To cut off the corner of the King's robe was an expression of utter contempt for the one who wore it. When we ruin the robe of the one making our life a misery, we are revealing the state of our own heart. If you read the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon On The Mount, treating someone with contempt is the same as murdering them. The way God sees it, there is no difference between treating your enemy with contempt, and sticking a knife into them. That's why David was so conscience stricken. One simple act of bravado had revealed the state of his heart.

Preparing For Kingship.

Each time David had the opportunity to kill Saul, God was preparing him to be King. The wilderness years were his training ground. The temptation to stick the knife into Saul was all part of God making him fit to rule. David eventually became the greatest King Israel had ever known. He became great because he learned obedience to God. Do you know why you have a King Saul in your life? It's part of the way God is preparing you for his Kingdom. It's part of his obedience training. It's part of his testing, to see if our obedience to his ways is greater than our desire to get even. What is God looking for in us? He's looking for an obedient heart.