



David's Fear of the Lord: The Righteous Are Rewarded (1 Sam 26)

Notes: Week Fifteen

New American Commentary¹

(11) David Spares Saul at the Hill of Hakilah [26:1-25](#)

[26:1-4](#) Saul's Judahite allies the Ziphites, a Calebite subclan, continued to supply the king with valuable intelligence reports of David's whereabouts. Perhaps they were motivated in the present instance by jealousy; David's marriage to the richest member of the Calebite clan may have been perceived as a usurpation of rights reserved for one of their own. In the present situation the Ziphites "went to Saul at Gibeah" and informed him that David was "hiding on the hill of Hakilah, which faces Jeshimon" (v. [1](#)), an unidentified site in the general area east of Ziph where they had previously spotted David (cf. [23:19](#)).

Acting on the basis of their information, "Saul went down to the Desert of Ziph" (v. [2](#)). As before (cf. [24:2](#)), Saul was accompanied by "his three thousand chosen men of Israel." Saul had his soldiers camp at a site that provided security, a strategic view of the region, and mobility for his troops (v. [3](#)). However, David remained hidden from view "in the desert."

Though David remained isolated and inaccessible to those seeking his life, he did send out scouts (v. [4](#)) who came close enough to the royal troops to learn "that Saul had definitely arrived."

[26:5-7](#) Armed with the knowledge of Saul's location, David and a select group of men stole into Saul's camp that night. Under the cloak of darkness, David may have been going there to gather additional information about the one who threatened him (cf. [Judg 7:10-15](#)). His covert efforts were rewarded, for he was able to identify the key personnel leading the forces as well as the exact location and arrangement of the camp: on this expedition Saul was accompanied by his cousin Abner. The arrangement of Saul's camp, combined with the location of the camp at the top of a hill, would have provided Saul with maximum protection.

Possessing this information, David was now in a position to use a favored military tactic that Saul also had employed, that of making a predawn raid on a hostile camp (cf. [Judg 7:9-25](#); [1 Sam 11:11](#)). David chose not to pass up this opportunity and asked two men, including Ahimelech the Hittite, if they cared to accompany him. Though Ahimelech had a Hittite background, his name was Semitic; this, added to the fact that he was in David's circle of trusted associates, suggests that his family had adopted Israelite cultural and religious practices, including the worship of Yahweh. Failing this, it would be hard to understand why David would have permitted this man to be part of his group (cf. [Deut 7:1-4](#); [20:17](#)).

David's objective in this nocturnal expedition was to make an incursion into the very center of the camp. Abishai, David's nephew (cf. [1 Chr 2:16](#)), agreed to accompany him on this dangerous journey. Making their way past the perimeter to Saul, they found his spear, symbol of his authority and power, "stuck in the ground near his head," where he could quickly grab it in an emergency. Situated nearby him were "Abner and the soldiers."

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 252-258.

26:8–11 Abishai interpreted their remarkable success in penetrating the defenses as proof that “God has delivered your enemy into your hands” (v. [8](#)). Wishing to be a good steward of the opportunity, he requested the honor of killing David’s enemy for him, offering to pin Saul “to the ground with one thrust of my spear.”

David responded to Abishai’s theologically based proposal with a convincing theological counterargument. Saul must be left untouched, for no one “can lay a hand on the LORD’s anointed and be guiltless” (v. [9](#)). As David perceived it, the situation presented a divine trial—an opportunity to demonstrate restraint and goodwill toward one of the Lord’s anointed leaders, not vengeance on a human foe. It was not David’s role to punish the servant of another. “Yahweh lives” (v. [10](#); NIV, “As the LORD lives”), and so “Yahweh will strike” his servant Saul in his own time and way, either through nonviolent or violent means. The incident with Nabal had just affirmed David’s convictions regarding the Lord’s sovereignty in judgment.

Because of his fear of the Lord, David was prevented from laying “a hand on the LORD’s anointed” (v. [11](#)). But that did not mean he could not lay hands on the property of Lord’s anointed, especially if it saved lives and prevented needless bloodshed. Accordingly, he commanded Abishai to take Saul’s “spear”—symbol of his power in society—and “water jug”—symbol of his life-sustaining resources. Having thus symbolically stripped Saul of both his social standing and life, they left.

26:12–16 David and Abishai accomplished this entire act of bravado in secrecy: “No one saw or knew about it, nor did anyone wake up” (v. [12](#)). Yet the writer does not credit this achievement to human skill or stealth; as in previous crises (cf. [17:46–47](#); [23:12–14](#)), it was the Lord who was at work on David’s behalf. The means the Lord used were diverse—a perfectly aimed stone, a word of revelation, “a deep sleep”—but in each case the result was the same. The Lord once again demonstrated his incredible capacity to provide exactly what was needed to rescue his saints.

Going down the hill of Hakilah and then ascending another “hill some distance away” (v. [13](#)), David began the climactic stage of his “assault” on Saul and his men, the verbal assault. In the predawn darkness David’s voice echoed across the canyon as “he called out to the army and to Abner son of Ner” (v. [14](#)), Saul’s cousin and most powerful aide, and awakened them from their supernatural slumber. Then as they groped their way to consciousness, David began to taunt them with a series of four questions and a pronouncement of judgment.

Abner responded to David’s first question by inquiring about the identity of this one who would dare to disturb the king’s sleep. David refused to reveal his name; instead, he plied Abner with a pair of contemptuous questions. First, he questioned Abner’s manhood: “You’re a man, *aren’t you?*” (v. [15](#); italics added). Next, he raised questions about Abner’s competency as Israel’s most powerful soldier: “Why didn’t you guard your lord the king” when “someone came to destroy” him? Having reminded the soldier Abner that such negligent conduct “is not good” (v. [16](#)), David spoke as a judge at a court martial and declared Saul’s entire elite force to be “sons of death” (NIV, “deserve to die”) for their failure to “guard ... the LORD’s anointed.” To verify this grave charge, David urged Abner to confirm the absence of “the king’s spear and the water jug that were near his head.”

26:17–20 Saul, by now awake, tentatively proposed an answer to Abner’s question (cf. v. [14](#)): “Is that your voice, David my son?” (v. [17](#)). Saul’s question echoes a previous one (cf. [24:16](#)) and strengthens the parallels that exist between the events of chaps. [24](#) and [26](#). David confirmed the accuracy of the king’s conjecture and then raised a series of questions and conjectures designed to probe and resolve the conflict separating the two men. First, David asked “why” Saul was “pursuing his servant” (v. [18](#)). David’s next two questions assumed that Saul’s answer to the first question was that David was worthy of death. But if David had committed some awful crime, what was it? “What evil” was in his “hand” (NIV, “What wrong am I guilty of”)?

Before permitting Saul to respond, David asked the king to listen as he uttered a solemn two-part prayer designed to put an end to the conflict that had created so much grief for David. In the first part of his prayer David assumed the possibility that the trouble in his life was of his own making; perhaps because of some sin he committed “the LORD has incited” Saul to pursue David (v. [19](#)). If that was the case, David prayerfully requested that the Lord accept a freewill offering to restore the broken relationship and end the strife.

In the second part of his prayer David expressed the possibility that “men”—not God—were the source of his problem. In such a case, David prayed that God would judge them for their sin—that they “be cursed before the LORD.” The sin of such men was to seek to drive David from the Lord and the blessings that accompanied a relationship with the true God. As a member of the covenant community David had a “share in the LORD’s inheritance,” that is, either the right to a plot of land entrusted to his family by the Lord, the Promised Land as a whole, or membership in the covenant community. Inseparably linked to this gift of land, David had an obligation to fulfill the terms of the covenant relationship with the Lord, especially the requirement to serve the Lord (cf. [Exod 20:2–4](#); [23:25](#); [Deut 6:13](#); [10:12](#), [20](#); [11:13](#); [13:4](#)). But wicked men had “driven” David away from that which the Lord had given him, and now they were trying to make him “serve other gods.” Those who encouraged David to serve other gods were acting like false prophets, who were under God’s curse and were to be put to death (cf. [Deut 13:1–5](#)).

David implied that Saul, not God, was the source of his problem. Accordingly, he pleaded with the king not to let his “blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the LORD” (v. [20](#)), that is, not to force David to continue to live in exile. Reiterating a theme expressed in his first encounter with Saul in the Desert of Ziph (cf. [24:14](#)), David asked Saul to put his present actions in proper perspective. The king was squandering precious national resources “to look for a flea,” to hunt “a partridge,” and he should stop it.

[26:21–25](#) As before, David’s actions and words brought Saul to a temporary state of repentance and reconciliation. He confessed he had “sinned” and urged his “son” to “come back” (v. [21](#)). This time, however, the words rang hollow, even though they were accompanied by words of vigorous self-condemnation and the promise not “to harm” David “again.”

David, who knew Saul better than Saul knew himself, accepted the king’s words for what they were—sincere, deadly lies. Accordingly, David tacitly turned down the invitation to return. Instead, he asked the king to have one of his “young men come over” to David and retrieve “the king’s spear” (v. [22](#)).

This gracious offer by the triumphant David was accompanied by a brief discourse on the “law of spiritual sowing and reaping,” the last recorded words spoken by David to his royal father-in-law. The major premise in David’s closing words is that “Yahweh returns to a man his righteousness and faithfulness” (v. [23](#); NIV, “the LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness”), a statement that foreshadows Paul’s assertion in [Gal 6:7](#). Because David acted righteously and faithfully by sparing “the LORD’s anointed” when “the LORD delivered” him into David’s hands, David could humbly expect and pray that the Lord would “value [his] life and deliver [him] from all trouble” (v. [24](#); cf. [Ps 54:7](#)).

As if to confirm his premise, David’s gracious acts toward Saul were returned to him in the form of gracious words of blessing and promise. In Saul’s last recorded words to his son-in-law, he declared David “blessed” and confidently predicted a glorious future for David. Having uttered those words, both men parted ways, never to see each other again in life.

Complete Biblical Library Commentary²

26:1-25. This chapter narrates the last meeting between David and Saul. As in the last encounter, David had the opportunity to kill Saul, but he refused. Although Saul, in a contrite frame of mind, wanted him to return, David sought refuge among the Philistines after Saul returned to Gibeah.

26:1-5. When the Ziphites reported that David and his men were hiding in the Desert of Ziph, Saul and 3000 troops came down from Gibeah to renew their search for David. Both Ziph, a site of strategic importance for protecting the southeastern approach to Hebron, about four miles distant, and central Judah had numerous strongholds which provided secure places for David and his band. David did not wait for Saul to find him, but aggressively made a search for him to pinpoint his exact location. (Ziph had been allotted to Judah under Joshua.)

26:6-12. When David asked for a volunteer to accompany him into Saul's camp, Abishai, a brother of Joab and son of Zeruiah, a sister of David, accepted the challenge. In the darkness of night, they found Saul and the soldiers surrounding him soundly asleep. When Abishai interpreted these circumstances as a God-given opportunity, he volunteered to kill Saul. But David did not want anyone to incur the guilt of killing "the Lord's anointed." David expressed the same trust as he had when he faced Goliath, confident that God Who had delivered him from the lion and the bear ([17:34-37](#)) and from Goliath ([17:46](#)) would bring him deliverance from Saul. Taking the spear and water jug, David and Abishai escaped undetected, because "a deep sleep from the Lord was fallen upon them."

26:13-16. Placing himself at a safe distance across the valley, David shouted down to Abner and his men. In an attitude of scorn or possible incredulous pity, David taunted Abner for not guarding "your master, the Lord's anointed," when someone came to destroy "thy lord the king." To make Abner realize that the king had been in danger, he challenged him to look for the king's spear and water jug.

26:17-25. Hearing David's voice, Saul entered the conversation, addressing him as "my son David," (repeated in [vv. 21](#) and [25](#)). David replied by raising the question as to the reason for Saul's pursuit. David refused to admit any wrongdoing, suggesting two possible sources of Saul's dogged pursuit of him. If God had incited Saul against him, then David hoped an offering would be acceptable. If men were at fault, then David would wish them accursed. As a fugitive driven from "the inheritance of the Lord" (the land of Israel; cf. [2 Sam. 20:19](#); [21:3](#)), David prayed that Saul would not cause him to die "far from the presence of the Lord" (NIV). He chided Saul that, as "the king of Israel," he had come out on a trivial matter—"to look for a flea," or a "partridge in the mountains" (NIV).

Saul once more confessed that he had sinned (cf. [15:24](#)) and acknowledged that "my soul was precious to thine eyes this day," and "I have played the fool." David offered to return his spear, the symbol of death, but not the water jug, a symbol of life, as he maintained control of the situation.

David once more acknowledged that God had given him the opportunity to harm Saul, but that he had refused to lay hands on him as "the Lord's anointed," with a prayer that God would value David's life as he had valued the life of Saul and that he would be delivered from "all tribulation"—trouble caused by Saul. Recognizing that David would be his successor on the throne of Israel, Saul blessed David. Then they parted, never to meet again.

2. *The Complete Biblical Library – Samuel*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 26".