

Days of Bad News From Bad Choices
Lecture on 1 Samuel 27 – 30
by Dellena Ludwig

As I studied this portion of Scripture, I thought of the bad choices made by David, and Saul and myself. I noticed how David, without praying to God chose to live with his enemies. I winced as Saul chose to seek help from a medium. I anticipated with dread as David led his men toward a battle against their own nation. Then I connected with New Year's resolutions. How many of my own decisions, made without consulting God and his word, have gone so wrong that I have tried to clean them up with a new resolution?

Today we will reflect on the choices of David and Saul and see how we may learn from their experiences. May the Lord work in our hearts a deep desire to more consistently ask His guidance and more patiently wait for His answers that our choices may be good ones.

David's first choice was found in our first verse. “But David thought to himself, 'One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.’” The last thing Saul had said to David was, “May you be blessed, David my son; you will do great things and surely triumph,” and Saul returned home. [1 Samuel 26:25] Why did Saul's comment lead David to choose to live with the Philistines?

We recalled that Saul had repeatedly said he would leave David alone, and yet repeatedly tried to find him again to kill him. David could not believe that Saul would keep his word. So in doubt, frustration and fear, David chose to flee to the land of the Philistines. Perhaps he recalled Saul's reluctance to step out in battle with the Philistines. It was Jonathan and later David himself who led most of the campaigns against the Philistines. David probably felt that only there, could he get real rest from Saul's pursuit.

However, the last time David went to seek safe haven with the Philistines, he feared for his life! In chapter 21 we studied how David fled to Gath after he had received the sacred bread and Goliath's sword from the high priest Ahimelek. But the people there remembered David and the song sung after his fight with Goliath of Gath. David realized how dangerous it was to be alone in this city whose champion he had killed, so he feigned

lunacy to escape.

Now the situation was different. David had a proven army with him. So, David reasoned that his 600 men would be both a physical protection for him, and a reason to keep some distance from those who would remember him. The second circumstance David used in his choice was that several years had passed and King Achish was dead and now his son, also called King Achish was ruling Gath. Perhaps the son would not remember David's previous visit or his past. Additionally, David decided his mistake, last time, was in choosing to live in the fortified city itself. Perhaps if he could live at a distance from the king and his army, he could avoid being so conspicuous to the people; out of sight - out of mind. So David requested to be assigned to a "country town" since it would be too big an imposition to Achish to house David and all his men in the royal city. Yet good circumstances do not prove such a choice is God's will.

Ziklag was a town in the Negev, or south of Israel. At the time of the conquest, it was taken by Israel and given to the tribe of Judah, and later to the tribe of Simeon. However, because it was so far south, it was subject to raids and was believed to be abandoned at this time. It fit David's needs perfectly. The final reason for his choice was that David found out that his plan worked! In verse four we read, "When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer searched for him." [1 Sam. 27:4]

But did you notice that nowhere among David's reasoning was a point of him having consulted God over this choice? It all made great logical sense, but he did not ask whether it was the move God would have him make. So many times my first reaction to trials and difficult situations is to try to get away from them. I desire to leave the challenges of a difficult relationship; of a job with irritating co-workers or bosses; or the consequences of my own bad choices. But, don't we learn more about God's love from the hurtful situations? Don't we learn to lean on Him more, during difficult times and learn how faithful He always is if we walk with him through the tough times? God never abandons us whether we make bad choices or make good choices. He is always with us. In His sovereignty during all the choices of our life God continues working for the good of those called by His love. [Rom. 8:28]

David soon found out that feigned allegiance to the enemies of the Lord would require even more duplicity. What should David do each day if he

was pretending to be an outlaw? He couldn't go hang around the castle and share tough-guy stories with Achish's soldiers for risk of being recognized. However, since he had committed himself to have loyalty to Achish, he had to serve him through attacks on the enemies of the Philistines, namely, Israel. So periodically, David and his men would venture out of Ziklag to attack and pillage and return with a part of the spoil for the lord over them, Achish. But of course the king wanted to hear where David got those prizes. So now David chose to lie. “When Achish asked, ... David said, 'Against the Negev of Judah' or 'Against the Negev of Jerahmeel' or 'Against the Negev of the Kenites.’”

These were all people living in the area of south Judah, from the tribe of Simeon. Although David truthfully reported that he was attacking Achish's enemies, by leading him to believe he had attacked Israel's villages, he actually was attacking nomadic tribes roaming near Israel's towns, that remained after the conquest of Israel. God commanded Moses, “Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places.” [Numbers 33:52] “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.” [Numbers 33:55]

The people did not utterly destroy all of the people of Canaan. And, just as God warned, they continued to raid Israel and give them trouble. We have already studied how even Saul had not kept God's commands when ordered to kill all of the Amalekites in chapter 15. Samuel killed their king, Agag, himself and warned Saul that his rejection of God's orders caused God to reject Saul as king. However, the Amalekites were a nomadic group and so David himself attacked another large group of them now, as well as the Geshurites and the Girzites. David told “partial truths” to hide his true activities. David was allowed to rest secure in Ziklag, for about a year and a half, because Achish thought David had surely alienated himself from his own people by committing these raids. He believed, “...David ...has become so obnoxious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant for life.” [1 Sam. 27:12]

Now the biggest test of David's duplicity was about to begin. Verse one

in chapter 28 revealed: “In those days the Philistines gathered their forces to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, 'You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army.’” Why did the Philistines decide that they had a chance against Israel now? Sir Isaac Newton reasoned, “they were recruited about this time by vast numbers of men driven out of Egypt by Amasis.” So, many men from Egypt joined the Philistine army. Therefore, the overlords decided this was a force that could successfully invade Israel and finally conquer them. Secondly, David was no longer Saul's champion. Both facts motivated the Philistines to gather every soldier they possessed as they marched through their land, along the Mediterranean sea, to attack in the heart of Israel, the Jezreel valley.

You noticed David's answer to this summons: “Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do.” Achish was satisfied with David's rather nebulous answer and actually made David and his men Achish's own body guard for life. [1 Sam. 28:2] So, David and all of his men found themselves leaving Ziklag, and following the armies of the king of Gath in the massive movement of troupes toward battle against his own people.

I imagine that David and his men were very preoccupied with the dilemma they faced. Matthew Henry described it in these words. “David could not refuse Achish without danger. If he promised assistance and then stood neuter (1), or went over to the Israelites, he would behave with ingratitude and treachery. If he fought against Israel, he would sin greatly. It seemed impossible that he should get out of this difficulty with a clear conscience. But his evasive answer, intended to gain time, was not consistent with the character of an Israelite indeed.” And so they marched north, deep in their thoughts.

You cannot move that many troupes without others finding out that something is up. So Saul called up his own army to meet that of the Philistines. However, as Saul arranged his men on Mount Gilboah he watched the Philistines gathering in Shunem in overwhelming numbers. We read in 1 Sam. 28:5-7 Saul's reaction. “When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. Saul then said to his attendants, 'Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of

her.' 'There is one in Endor,' they said.”

In Leviticus 20:27, God told Israel His Law concerning sorcery: “A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.” Saul in his early reign had swept such people out of Israel in obedience to God's law. But now, he seeks one. The Hebrew word for a medium is “ob” which means “hollow”. It was believed that those who claimed the ability to speak to the dead would allow “a familiar spirit” to enter their hollow and speak from their “belly”. His men had heard such a woman lived in En-dor, which was just 7-8 miles from Gilboa. Now Saul made his very bad choice, to seek help from the very sorceress he had once tried to eliminate.

Saul had tried to ask God, but gotten no answer. We know he had been too impatient to wait on Samuel or God's answers before. Saul had a habit of acting too quickly when he was stressed. Did he even seek out one of the prophets? Was he even able to get to sleep to be able to dream? He had killed the true high priest, leaving his son, Abiathar, to flee to David's camp for protection with the original Urim and Thumin. Commentators believe Saul had appointed a second high priest, Zadok, who made a second ephod with an Urim and Thumin, which apparently he consulted, but got no answer about going into this battle.

So, consumed with fear, Saul disguised himself and traveled with a few men to find this medium living in En-dor. The disguise was for two reasons. First, he didn't want the woman to be elusive, fearing he had come to kill her. Secondly, to get to En-dor, they would have to travel very near the enemy camp. Jamison explained in his commentary that, “Saul had to pass over the shoulder of the ridge on which the Philistines were encamped,” therefore this disguise might keep their sentries from being alarmed. Saul and his trusted men arrived at night to find the woman. She was cautious, as she knew well the penalty the king of Israel had imposed on others like her. She feared these men of Israel had only come to trap her for execution. But to put her at ease, “Saul swore to her by the Lord, 'As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this.’” [1 Samuel 28:10] Saul knew consulting a medium was against God's law. But he swears by Elohim that she is free from punishment!

The woman proceeded to prepare herself for this séance, by asking Saul for the name of the person he desired to “call up.” It was believed that the medium could contact a spirit of someone who had died and gone to sheol for answers. Some would go into a trance and the spirit would enter them and converse in another voice through the “ob” and give insight, sometimes relaying messages from departed loved ones.

At this point we must discuss psychics. Many commentators believed this woman was merely putting on an act. Because her business was to know things, she would keep abreast of the news and know the latest info so that she could fake the “new word” supposedly from the departed soul to satisfy her customers. Psychics lie, relating very nebulous answers to the client's questions and then require further visits to glean more answers, always requiring more money per séance.

Satan is a liar and the father of lies. [John 8:44] On the contrary, “Jesus said, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'” [John 14:6] If you want to know what you should do, in any circumstance, turn to Jesus. In prayer and in His Word, He will show you the truth. Saul refused to wait for God's answer and turned to this psychic who would allow “evil spirits”; also called “familiar spirits” to possess her. Normally a medium would seek to entrap people into a never ending dependance on a fallen angel's trickery. This may have been this woman's general mode of operation. However several details in this story relate that this séance did not happen as usual.

First, Saul had just mentioned the name of Samuel and immediately he appeared. Verse 12 reveals, “When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!’” It does not appear that the woman had time to “go into her trance” and this sudden appearance of a different spirit, without her usual preparation or “spirit guide”, was startling even to this one who trafficked in the demon world. However, even Saul may not have seen the vision of Samuel himself. Because he asked the woman what the person looked like. It was the description of the robe that convinced Saul, this is Samuel.

Secondly, the woman in her terror, may have left the room, because verse 21 begins, “When the woman came to him...” So, she was no longer

acting as a medium during this conversation. Saul knelt down and bowed as he personally talked to Samuel. He stated his reason for disturbing Samuel and his great distress over the impending battle, because the Lord would not answer him either by prophets or by dreams. He did not admit that he had killed the high priest nor the failed attempt to seek guidance through the new Urim and Thumim. However, this seems to be a direct conversation.

Thirdly, the scriptures state that this was Samuel, not a “figure” looking like Samuel. And fourth, information was given that is not recorded in Samuel's statements before. Now Samuel relates firmly that the kingdom leaving Saul's hands will go to David, while, in his last conversation with Saul, he only said, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors-to one better than you.” [1 Sam. 15:28]

Furthermore, Samuel had previously warned Saul and that he and his sons would die on the same day. However, in this encounter he adds the fact that this very battle Saul faced was the one in which both he and his sons will die. Finally, he adds the fact that this battle will include Israel's utter defeat and their deliverance into the hands of the Philistines. [1 Samuel 28:19] At this last revelation, Saul collapsed onto the ground, utterly exhausted and famished. And the vision of Samuel must have ceased.

Now, it is curious that Saul chose to call on Samuel for advice at all. Matthew Henry comments, “While Samuel was living, we never read of Saul's going to advise with him in any difficulties; it had been well for him if he had. But now he is dead: Bring me up Samuel.... The woman's surprise and terror proved that it was an unusual and unexpected appearance.” The entire encounter shows that Saul's dread over Samuel's original prophecy had consumed him and this last hour séance left Saul further in despair. God forbid any such interaction with sorcery for good reason. Whether or not this was truly an encounter with dead Samuel, the result left Saul so exhausted he could not get up off the floor without help.

It took both Saul's men and the woman to ease him onto the bed to rest until a meal was prepared. His despair left Saul with no appetite or will to eat. But there remained a battle to fight and men who would look to his leadership. He could no longer be paralyzed with fear or dread. That night, Saul and his men in stealth found their way back to their camp.

Meanwhile, the Philistine troupes marched toward the Valley of Jezreel. Each city they passed added more units to their army, with David and the men of Achish's army bringing up the rear. In chapter 29, apparently two days into the march, the Philistine lords stopped to review and count all the soldiers they had gathered, as each division passed by. But when they saw David and his men, they became alarmed. They called Achish to join them and questioned why Israelites were in his units. Achish replied, "Is this not David who was an officer of Saul king of Israel? He has already been with me for over a year, and from the day he left Saul until now, I have found no fault with him." [1Sam. 29:3]

However, the commanders did find fault with David and were very angry at Achish for bringing him along. They knew his reputation well and thought they could not trust him but would probably find him attacking from their rear position before the battle was done. "How better could he regain his master's favor than by taking the heads of our own men?" [1 Sam. 29:4] So the Philistine commanders made the decision for David. He must return to Gath and sit out this battle. He no longer needed his mental debate about what he should do to show his loyalty to Achish. He would reverse his two day march and head back to Gath, adding another day's march to get home to Ziklag.

A full day's march was nothing new to David and his men. They would be pretty tired after this leg of marching up and back again for five days straight. However, the sight of home and family would make it all worth while, and relief of not fighting against Israel would make it almost a time of celebration for these men.

But as they neared Ziklag they were not greeted with the calls of wives or laughter of their children, but with the sight and smell of smoke. In their absence, their homes had been raided and burned to the ground! Imagine the men, breaking into a run and frenetically searching through the rubble of their homes for signs of their families. They called and got no answer and searched for hiding places to no avail. Finally, the truth set in. Someone else had been watching, when they deployed with the Philistine troops, so they could raid undefended villages. Every thing of value and every woman and child had been stolen. Why had they burned the village? Nothing was left.

Then their sorrow set in and all of these brave soldiers wept. Each

mourned for their wives and children. But being soldiers, their reaction was to do something about this as their sorrow turned to rage! “David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters...” [1 Sam. 30:6] Each man had been also debating in their own mind whether the choice to march into battle with Achish had not been a good choice or a bad one. Now they knew, it was definitely the wrong choice. It must all be David's fault that they had not been there to defend their families.

“But David found strength in the Lord his God.” [1 Sam. 30:6] When we find ourselves having to make a difficult choice, whom do we blame for the outcome? While everything seems to be going fine, boy, we made a great choice, didn't we? But when things go south, do we blame God? “Why did you let this happen?” “God, have you turned your back on me?” But just like a child standing in the middle of the clothing racks who just realized that the fun game of hide and seek has caused her to lose sight of Mommy, we only need to turn around and fall into our loving parent's arms. Like the bumper sticker says, “Feel far from God? Guess who moved.” The Lord God never left David as he wandered in the desert and land of Philistia. So David sought God's strength for himself and then for his men.

Strengthened in God's presence, David called Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod to him. David inquired direction from the Lord: “Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?” “Pursue them,” he answered. “You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue.” [1 Sam. 30:7,8] So, their march resumed, following the trail left as these raiders marched with spoil, women, children, flocks and herds in tow. They came to Besor Ravine, which may have been at flood stage. Again a choice was made. David left 200 men out of his 600 loyal troops, who were too exhausted to cross the ravine, with all of the heavy supplies they had been carrying to battle. The 400 who traveled on would be able to now travel much more rapidly and the ravine was a good place for the supplies to be guarded safely.

Sometimes in our sorrow and fatigue, we all need to step aside and get much needed rest. The demands of our work and responsibilities often push us to go and get things done, to the detriment of our health. The Lord had

declared that men should have one day of rest, dedicated to worship Him as well as to refresh our bodies. How easily little chores and busy entertainment leave us exhausted and unprepared to resume a work week. But the 400 pressed on, now that their burdens were set aside to continue the pursuit.

Finally, they came upon a lone straggler. He too was very weak, so they gave him some food and water, so he could be questioned. Verse 13 says, "I am an Egyptian, the slave of an Amalekite. My master abandoned me when I became ill three days ago. We raided the Negev of the Kerethites and the territory belonging to Judah and the Negev of Caleb. And we burned Ziklag." Yes, they were on the right trail! David and his men also realized that the utter destruction of Ziklag was an act of revenge by the Amalakites for David's raids. So David promised not to return this slave to his old master if the man would show them where this nomadic tribe had gone.

By the next afternoon, David and his men found the great mass of Amalekite raiders, scattered over the countryside. Apparently those men had stopped in this valley thinking they were well away from any retribution. After all, the Philistine and Israelite men were quite occupied with each other in the Valley of Jezreel. Here, they divided the spoil and began to celebrate their great raiding adventure with a feast and drinking. The word "reveling" in verse 16 indicates they were dancing in worship of their gods. But their revelry was premature.

"David fought them from dusk until the evening of the next day, and none of them got away, except four hundred young men who rode off on camels. David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives. Nothing was missing..." [verse 17] What an extraordinary victory granted by the Lord! They saved every woman and child with none of them lost! Plus, they gained such a great treasure of spoil that each person gained his personal goods back, plus more! David also gained huge flocks and herds.

Triumphantly, the families began to walk back toward Ziklag with all of the goods. As they approached the Besor Ravine, David called out in greeting to the 200 men left behind and the joy revved up again when their families were reunited. However, among David's men, there were a few trouble makers and "evil men." At the thought of splitting their spoil with these other men who stayed behind, greed boiled up within them. "Because

they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder we recovered. However, each man may take his wife and children and go.” Where did they expect them to go? They were considered outlaws in Israel. Ziklag had been burned. Had greed erased their memories, causing them to imagine they had persevered through all of the days of marching and fought overwhelming forces all in their own strength?

But David did not forget. He kindly reminded them, “No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the Lord has given us. He has protected us and handed over to us the forces that came against us. Who will listen to what you say? The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike.” [1 Sam. 30:23,24] David had become a noble leader. He recognized the value of the men who stayed behind. By enabling the 400 to press on quickly, they participated equally in the victory. How terrible it would have been if the Amalakites had finished their revelry and split up to go different directions and begin to sell off their slaves? No, many commentators recognized the lesson in David's decision. Moses was held in honor for his prayer as were the two men at his side who helped hold up his hands in his first encounter with the Amalekites. Exodus 17:10, 11 records, “So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.” As the long battle continued, Aaron and Hur had to help hold up Moses' hands and the battle went to the Israelites as a unit.

We must never under estimate the power of prayer in our spiritual battles. Mac Laren commented: “The smallest piece of indirect Christian services may be thus elevated to the same plane as the greatest.” We may not find ourselves standing before a pulpit or in a prison to preach, nor may our situations allow all of us to go to foreign lands as missionaries. But we can give. We can pray. We can serve. We can encourage those on the “front line” by notes and appreciation. In this way we all are taking an equal share in the battle for the hearts and souls of unbelievers.

The entire company returned to Ziklag. And David sent gifts of some of the plunder to the elders in several cities in Judah who had helped shelter

he and his men over the years. How important it is to thank others. Having lost everything, and then recovered it again, David recalled many blessings during his lean years of hiding from Saul. He now wanted to thank those who had helped him in small and big ways.

As we look to this next year, I pray it will not take a calamity in our lives to remind us to be thankful in this new year of 2017. That is one resolution that will always be a good choice.