

Keilah, Saul, Nabal and the Bitter Root

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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There I was in Wal-Mart last Wednesday ready to check out at one of the self-serve cashiers (to save time), every one of which was occupied when I got there. When the one just in front of me became available, I stepped forward, only to hear a voice beside me say, "Sir, this is the line," motioning that it began behind her. Now, I was pretty sure that I was waiting before this other person had come, and there was no sign indicating where the line was to form. However, I said, "Go ahead." That's what my lips said, but my heart wanted to say something else. I thought I had been wronged.

To make matters worse, while I still waited, another person boldly strode forward and positioned herself directly behind the cash out register in front of me! We call the emotion that stirs in our heart in these circumstances "resentment." We've all experienced it. How do we deal with it? In my case, I reasoned that the few minutes "lost" were not worth getting upset about. Maybe the lady who spoke to me was right.

David is called in the Holy Scriptures the "man after God's own heart." We know that that name was not given him because of his sins; we believe that it was given him because of his generous and forgiving spirit.

God's heart is one which freely forgives. The prophet Micah asks, "Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." Micah 7:18, 19.

David exhibited that quality of forgiveness; may we call it a "kingly quality"? He showed a forgiving heart several times, three of which we'll note today. You and I are called to cultivate the attitude of forgiveness; to leave behind resentment. We're told, "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." Hebrews 12:15. In Acts 8:23 we're informed of a certain man named Simon (not Simon Peter) who was "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

The Lord would today save us from bitterness and resentment. There is more than one kind of bitterness; the type of which we speak is the resentment that results from mistreatment by others, especially when you have done them good. It is likely; in fact it is highly probable that at some point in your life you have done something good for someone else, only to be repaid with

evil. Take heart: that is God's story. He knows all about that. More than we can know He's experienced that very thing. Did He not give humanity everything, only to be repaid by being nailed to a cross?

Let's take a look at a few stories in the Bible in which someone who walked the same path we walk, David, encountered situations in which evil was paid for good. He did a deed of kindness only to be repaid by the coin of scorn or betrayal. We will ask ourselves, "How did David react in these situations? What can we learn from his example." In these stories we will see reflected the love of our dear Lord Jesus. It happens that these three stories are related in three successive chapters of the Holy Bible starting in I Samuel 23. I came across these stories a few weeks ago during my morning devotional reading.

"Then they told David, saying, 'Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and they are robbing the threshing floors.' Therefore David inquired of the LORD, saying, 'Shall I go and attack these Philistines?' And the LORD said to David, 'Go and attack the Philistines, and save Keilah.'" I Samuel 23:1, 2.

This took place, as did the other two stories we'll consider, before David was made king. He had been anointed by Samuel to be the future monarch, but at this time Saul was still on the throne. Saul, being jealous of David, was seeking his life and David found himself fleeing from the sword of Saul and his men. At this point he was near Keilah, a city of Judah meaning "fortress." It was a town "with gates and bars." Located on a hilltop around 1,500 feet in elevation, it was surrounded by terraced fields in which their crops were grown, and was about 18 miles southwest of Jerusalem. A Christian tradition states that the prophet Habakkuk was buried at Keilah.

Being south and west of Jerusalem, it was in the direction of Philistine cities like Gath and Gaza and became their target. They timed their attacks to occur just after the grain was harvested, threshed and put up for the winter. They were "robbing the threshing floors," that is, the place where the grain was stockpiled. This was particularly exasperating, in that the citizens had gone to all the work to grow, reap and process their crops, only to have them seized by the Philistines. This is what the Midianites had done to Israel in the days of Gideon a few centuries before this.

David's heart was moved by this injustice and he felt that perhaps he and his 600 men could do something about it. But before launching an attack against the Philistines, he did something that is always a good thing to do. As reasonable and sensible as it might have seemed to him to come to the rescue of Keilah, he nevertheless "inquired of the Lord" as to what His will was in this matter. It's never wrong to do that. God responded that he should go and attack the city and save Keilah.

"And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines, struck them with a mighty blow, and took away their livestock. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah." I Samuel 23:5. He did a good thing for the inhabitants of Keilah. You would have thought that the residents would have responded to this act with applause and appreciation. You would have thought that they

might have erected a statue of David in the town square to honor him for the deliverance that was accomplished through him. What did they do to repay this deed of kindness? Let's read on.

Word leaked out to King Saul that David was in the city of Keilah. "Then Saul called all the people together for war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men." I Samuel 23:8. Surely the citizens would arise and defend their benefactor, wouldn't they? They would certainly protect the one who had saved them, risking his own life for their sake, wouldn't they?

Well, David wasn't entirely convinced, so he asked the Lord again for wisdom. "Then David said, 'O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.' And the LORD said, 'He will come down.' Then David said, 'Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?' And the LORD said, 'they will deliver you.'" I Samuel 23:10-12.

What do you think about that! How's that for gratitude! David saved them from their enemies, but they would, if given the opportunity, turn him over to Saul; a veritable death sentence. I'm sure that David felt betrayed by this news, but he apparently sought no revenge. We're not told that David vented whatever anger he might have had against them and destroyed them, as "human" a reaction as that might have been. He simply took his leave. He quietly left without drawing his sword. "So David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah and went wherever they could go." Verse 13. An amazing story! Not only as to Keilah's betrayal, but David's kindheartedness and restraint of a revengeful reaction.

The next chapter, chapter 24, concerns what David did when given the opportunity to kill King Saul, who was continuing to seek David's life. Remember that the relationship between Saul and David goes back even before the story of David's victory over Goliath. Saul had been afflicted with melancholy and despondency, and his staff looked for someone who could relieve the king's downtrodden spirits through the ministry of soothing music. Somebody there knew of David's talent in that area, and so whenever Saul's mind was deeply troubled, David's harp was summoned to the royal court. Within the strains of David's melodies was a tonic that brought Saul relief. David ministered to Saul's need and helped him. David did Saul an act of kindness.

David also helped Saul in the matter of Goliath, the giant of Gath, who taunted and mocked Israel for some 40 days and defied the God of Israel. Goliath called for a "champion," a "giant" to come out and fight against him. Question: who was Israel's "giant"? That would have been Saul, right? We're told that at the time of his coronation, Saul stood "head and shoulders" above all the rest. He was effectively Israel's "champion," and should have been the one to respond, in the name of the Lord, to Goliath's challenges. But he was frozen in fear. The truth was, he did not know the Lord and though he possessed crown, sword and spear, he did not "have what it takes," to effectively battle the enemy, which was the Spirit of God and therefore he could not accept the proposal.

It happened that the shepherd lad David was sent by his father to inquire as to the welfare of his three brothers who served Saul, and he found himself near the battle lines and heard the taunts of Goliath. Though he was a mere “stripling,” and without armor, sword or shield, he could not stand by and listen to his God being defied by this Philistine. Proceeding only with his sling and his staff (but in the armor of God!), David’s stone missile found its mark and the giant fell. A great victory was won through the Lord! David did a good thing and helped Saul. Through the Lord, he saved Israel that day.

But, on their way home, the ladies of Israel sang their song of praise, “Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands.” Oh, how this refrain rankled the spirit of Saul; it turned the victory into a defeat and he began a relentless campaign against his own countryman and savior, David! When reading these stories recently, I counted no less than 12 separate times that Saul attempted to kill David, not including the incident at Keilah.

If you look at the superscriptions of many of the psalms in the Bible, you will find that quite a number of them were composed by David as he was a fugitive from Saul. Some of these contain strong words of condemnation of his enemies. Some of them joyously anticipate the destruction of those who had risen against him. These psalms contain expressions like, “Let death seize them; let them go down alive into hell, for wickedness is in their dwellings and among them.” Psalm 55:17. “Break their teeth in their mouth, O God!” Psalm 56:6. “Pour out Your indignation upon them, and let Your wrathful anger take hold of them. Let their habitation be desolate; let no one dwell in their tents.” Psalm 69:24, 25. “Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.” Psalm 109:9. These were real feelings within David’s heart that found expression in the words of his poems. But did he act on those feelings? When given the opportunity, did he seek revenge on King Saul? What does the Bible say?

In the 24th chapter of I Samuel we have one of the dozen or more attempts by Saul to kill David. “Now it happened, when Saul had returned from following the Philistines, that it was told him, saying ‘Take note! David is in the Wilderness of En Gedi.’” I Samuel 24:1. This was near the western shores of the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem. Now it happened that David and his men were hiding in the deep recesses of a certain cave, and Saul entered the cave by himself to attend to his needs. David’s men exultantly whispered to their leader, “This is the day of which the LORD said to you, ‘Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you.’” I Samuel 24:4.

What did David do? In that circumstance, he certainly could have dispatched the life Saul as easily as easily as he could a flea. Saul was helpless and at the mercy of David. He wasn’t even aware that his life could have been in jeopardy. Whatever his feelings may have been toward the one whom he had helped a number of times and was now seeking his life, what did he actually do? David slipped up quietly and snipped a small part off from Saul’s robe. Even then his conscience bothered him!

“Now it happened afterward that David’s heart troubled him because he had cut Saul’s robe. And he said to his men, ‘The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD’s anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD.’” I Samuel 24:6. David made himself known to the king and let him know that the opportunity to do him harm had been voluntarily relinquished.

Saul had to admit that David was more righteous than he was. He stated, “And you have shown this day how you have dealt well with me; for when the LORD delivered me into your hand, you did not kill me. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him get away safely? Therefore may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day.” Verses 18, 19. For a short time, Saul abandoned the pursuit of David. Though David’s good deeds toward Saul were repaid by the king’s trying to kill him, David refused to harbor resentment toward him.

This forgiving spirit of David we saw demonstrated in the matter of the betrayal of the citizens of Keilah in chapter 23, in the matter of Saul’s attempt to end his life in chapter 24, and now in chapter 25 we will see another incident in which David was repaid evil for good. Samuel had just died. David, still a fugitive from Saul, was forced to wander the hillsides and wastelands, this time in the wilderness of Paran.

Paran was down in the Sinai Peninsula, an area through which Israel traveled on their way from Egypt to Canaan. David went from En Gedi, on the shoreline of the Dead Sea, south and west toward Paran. While there, he gave protection to the flocks of local ranchers, including one named Nabal, described as being a man of the town Maon in the flatlands of the wilderness and conducted his business in Carmel, a short distance away (obviously a different Carmel than described in Elijah’s encounter with the priests of Baal in I Kings 17), which is on the crest of some mountains and is the watershed for the area. All the rainfall west of Carmel flows into the Mediterranean Sea, all the water east ends up in the Dead Sea.

Because he had become acquainted with the shepherds of Nabal, and had defended his flocks, on a certain occasion, when in need of supplies, David sent messengers to reach out to the wealthy Nabal and request food. The messengers were met with insolence and rejection. “Then Nabal answered David’s servants, and said, ‘Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master. Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?’” I Samuel 25:10, 11.

David’s anger was stirred by this response, but because his heart was right toward the Lord, God intervened and moved upon the heart of Nabal’s wife Abigail who came and not only brought an abundance of food items, but appealed to David in behalf of her “foolish” (“Nabal” means “foolish”) husband. David’s sword was unstained by the blood of this rogue and no violence was done. Because his heart was open to the message of God, through this devout woman (who later became his wife), David’s resentment was quieted and removed. Though the good deeds he had shown Nabal were repaid with arrogance and insult, no retaliation would follow.

We've seen this morning three separate times when David did good only to be repaid by evil. The men of Keilah, King Saul and the insolent Nabal. David did retaliate. Settle it in your mind; at some point in your life you will do something good for someone else which will be repaid by ingratitude. If it hasn't happened yet, be assured that it will certainly come. It might be toward a family member, a church member, a co-worker or "friend." But it will happen. How will you react? That is the question. Will you harbor resentment and seek retaliation? Will the proverb of the world, "I don't get angry, I get even" be your slogan? Or will you quietly slip away, as did David at Keilah? Will your hand be restrained, as was David's regarding Saul and Nabal?

Resentment is a cancer which will, if unchecked, spread throughout your entire character. It may lie dormant for a time, but eventually the "root of bitterness" will surface and "cause trouble." God wants to save us from that, here on this earth and throughout eternity. The last thing God wants is for resentment to resurface after the sin problem is solved. Resentment is what caused sin in the first place; Lucifer was jealous of Christ and cherished hurt feelings because he was not given the place of Christ. But Christ is the Creator God, and Lucifer, though he was beautiful, wise and talented, but a creature. He had not reason to resent the homage paid to Christ.

Here is an important lesson. Resentment can spring from real or imagined sources. In David's situations, the causes that could have resulted in resentment were very real. But in Lucifer's case, the cause was imaginary. Nevertheless the resentment was real. If, when detected, Lucifer had dismissed those thoughts in his mind and let them go, history would have been different. But he chose to hang on to them, to nourish them, to feed them and they grew into rebellion. Resentment! A bitter root that springs up and "causes trouble"! God wants to heal our minds of resentment and hurt feelings. How often does discouragement set in because we have resentment and hurt feelings because of the way we have been treated by others, or though we were treated by others.

God has given us another way of life; the way of agape love. This kind of divine love is modeled by Jesus Who prayed for those Who crucified Him. This love was demonstrated by Stephen who prayed, "Lay not this sin to their charge" when he was being stoned. This love was in the heart of Joseph who, though betrayed by his brothers, forgave them and sought their good. This love was in David, the man after God's own heart, as shown in his treatment of his enemies. This love can be in our hearts and save us from the bitter root of resentment. Agape love, we're told, does not keep score of wrongs. (See I Corinthians 13:5 in some translations.)

Do you wish to ask God to implant that love in your heart today? He is able to help us overcome the sin of resentment.