

A Patient Heart

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1 Samuel 27-31

Today I want to talk to you about not just bad times, but about worse times, about times that are the worst! Have you ever had a day (or time in your life) where things just kept getting worse where you kept thinking “Things can’t get any worse than this!” But they do?

I had a day like that once several years ago. I was fishing at my uncle’s place on the Brazos River in Texas with a couple of my best friends. It was early spring. The first day of our fishing trip was beautiful. Birds were out, flowers blooming, 70 degrees, caught lots of fish, looked like it was going to be the perfect trip. But the next day soon as we got up, we knew it was not going to be a good day! There were no birds singing, the sky was gray (a storm had come through) and, when I went outside, everything had about a quarter inch of ice. It was bad! But it got worse, because all we had brought to wear were shorts and T-shirts, and we had set several fishing lines about a mile upstream we had to pick up! I had broken our only good paddle for our canoe the day before. All we had left was this cheap hollow plastic emergency paddle. So we took trash bags and made ponchos out of them and started paddling up the river with our one paddle, and we were freezing! But it got worse. When we were just about halfway there, the paddle snapped. So there we were wearing our trash-bag ponchos, paddling upstream in the ice-cold water with the blades of the broken paddles. At that point, I made a huge mistake: “You know, it can’t get any worse than this.”

The second I said that, as if on cue, there was a huge clap of thunder, and it started to hail, not big, dangerous hail (pea/marble sized) but lots and lots and lots of it. Soon we were hand-paddling upstream through about an inch of ice cubes! Then when we got to the lines, they were full of things we couldn’t even eat! They were full of snapping turtles and fish called gar that you can’t eat, but that have huge teeth and take forever to get off the line, while it’s hailing. Now that, was a day where things just kept getting worse!

Have you ever had a day like that? We’re kind of laughing about that day, but maybe you’ve had a time that kept getting worse, and it wasn’t so funny. Kids, maybe you were already having a bad day at school, and then you found out your best friend was moving away or maybe you found out you were moving! Adults, maybe you were living in a hard season of life and then you lost your job. Or maybe you got some really bad news or maybe you lost a loved one, and you thought to yourself “It doesn’t get any worse than this.” But it did. Ever have a time like that? Maybe you’re going through a time like that now.

Well if that’s you, today’s story is for you! Today we’re going to look at the story of David’s worst day ever, a time that kept getting worse! And today, here’s what I’m going to tell you. Here is the point of the sermon. I don’t usually tell you to the point of the sermon at the beginning, but today I am, and the point is this:

On your worst day, God is at work to bring about good in your life.

That's what we're going to see! Turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 27-31. Today, we are going to cover four chapters of the book of Samuel, and I have eight points to my sermon. I hope you packed a lunch! Seriously, today we are going to look at the story of David's Worst Day ever, and we are going to see four steps down to the worst day in David's life and four steps up to the fulfillment of God's promise to David. Then we'll talk about what this story means for you and me. Today we are going to start by looking at:

FOUR STEPS DOWN TO THE WORST DAY OF DAVID'S LIFE

Now if you were with us last week, you may remember that David has already been having some pretty bad days, days where he got a spear thrown at him, days where he had to run for his life. Saul (King of Israel) has been relentlessly pursuing David for about ten years. Eighteen times Saul has tried to kill David. That's what I call bad days! Now, in our story from last week, Saul promised to stop trying to kill David! But David knew that Saul wasn't going to stop. He was too jealous. So what is David going to do? Well, as our story begins David makes a very difficult decision, a decision to move away. This decision is his first step down to his worst day.

David loses his country

David decides to leave his home country, the country that he loves, the country of his people, the country that God promised he would become King of. He has to leave it. Look at 1 Samuel 27:1-2. This is right after last week's story:

Then David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul (Saul's never going to give up!). There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand." So David arose and went over, he and the 600 men who were with him, to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath.

- 1 Samuel 27:1-2

David takes his family and his army, and he moves into the land of the Philistines to the city of Gath! You may remember Gath. It was the hometown of the giant Goliath. David is in enemy territory! David stayed there for sixteen months! He settled in a town near Gath called Ziklag. To help his men stay safe and to be true to Israel, David had to pretend. He had to put on a big show for Achish. David would raid the tribes of the enemy nations around Israel and bring the plunder (the stuff he got) back to Achish. But when Achish asked David where he got all the stuff, David would always say "I raided the tribe of Judah in the land of Israel," so that Achish would think David was on his side. Now think how hard this time must have been for David. He was away from his extended family. He was surrounded by enemies, and there was no temple to worship the true God in. It was a hard time!

It was first step down to David's worst day ever. He probably thought it couldn't get worse, but it did! Not only did David lose his country, but second step down:

David loses his chance to be a hero.

So after sixteen months in Ziklag, something important happened. Look at:

In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, "Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army." David said to Achish, "Very well, you shall know what your servant can do." And Achish said to David, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life."

- 1 Samuel 28:1-2

So the Philistines are going to war against David's country (against Israel!), and David says he's going to fight with the Philistines against Israel! Now the passage doesn't tell us what David was thinking, but I DON'T think David was REALLY going to fight against Israel. I think David thought this was his big chance to help Israel. We know David was secretly loyal to Israel, because of the raiding he did. I think David had a plan to turn against the Philistines in the heat of battle. He knew the Philistines had the superior army, so what better way to help Israel than to go behind enemy lines and turn on the Philistines in the middle of the battle?

So David told Achish "I'm on your side!" But he was going to help Israel and be a hero! And who knows? Maybe he and his men could return to their country! So they marched to the battle with a perfect plan. But look at:

But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with Achish. And the commanders of the Philistines said to him, "Send the man (David) back, that he may return to the place to which you have assigned him. He shall not go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become an adversary to us. For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his king? Would it not be with the heads of the men here?"

- 1 Samuel 29:4

This is bad! The other Philistine commanders figured out David's plan, and they sent him back to Ziklag! Think how David and his men must have felt now. They had lost their chance to help Israel and be heroes and maybe even return to Israel. Now they had to march 55 miles back to Ziklag! That's the distance from Raleigh to the Virginia border! When they were marching back, I'll bet one of David's men said "It just can't get any worse than this!"

But you know what? It's about to get a whole lot worse! Not only does David lose his country, and his chance to be a hero but third step down David loses his family and possessions. Now, David and his men were probably pretty miserable as they marched home. But they were probably thinking "At least when we get back to Ziklag, I can have a hot meal and spend some time with my family." But look:

at 30:1-2

Now when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, the Amalekites had made a raid against the Negeb and against Ziklag. They had overcome Ziklag and burned it with fire and taken captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great. They killed no one, but carried them off and went their way.

- 1 Samuel 30:1-2

Oh no! When David and his men got to Ziklag, they found nothing, nothing at all! There was no family. They had all been kidnapped! There were no possessions. Everything was either taken or burned because a gigantic band of Amalekites Israel's ancient enemy had heard about the war between Israel and the Philistines, and seeing their chance, they had swept through the entire area of Judah and South Philistia and they had taken everything from city after city after city. Everything was gone! What would you do? Look at:

Then David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep. They cried, and cried and cried.

- 1 Samuel 30:4

David lost almost everything. The Amalekites had stolen his family and his possessions. His men were exhausted from the 55 miles hike, exhausted from grief, and they had no idea if they would ever recover their families. But you know what? This day still wasn't done. It was about to get even worse:

David loses his men.

Look at:

And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters.

- 1 Samuel 30:6a

These men these faithful friends these men who had stayed with David through thick and thin. These men, who had stuck with him and ran for their lives and never complained, even when David had chances to kill Saul but didn't, these men who had followed David into enemy territory and marched off to battle with him had now had enough. They had lost patience with David. They had enough, and they were thinking about stoning him to death! For a while, David lost their trust.

Now that was the bottom. David had lost just about everything a person could lose. He had no king. Saul was against him. He had no country. They were living in the land of their enemies. He had no possessions. They had all been taken by the Amalekites. He had no family. They had all been kidnapped, and he was on the verge of losing his entire army. David had almost nothing. Have you ever been there? Maybe you're there now.

It might seem like David had nothing left, but that wouldn't quite be true. David still had one thing the most important thing: David had the Lord. He had God on his side! And listen, you have the Lord no matter where you're at. Even if you are living through your very worst day ever, if you belong to Jesus, you have the Lord. Because remember, David had lost just about everything, but he had the Lord and trusted the Lord. Because David trusted the Lord, he started the second half of the story:

FOUR STEPS TO THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISES

David had lost just about everything. But because he had the most important thing (the Lord), the tide of this day and the tide of David's life was about to turn. He was about to stop losing things and start gaining. Let's look at what David gains. First:

David gains strength from God.

So here's David. He's at the bottom, but there's one little phrase that changes everything in our story. Look at verse 6b. The verse ends this way:

But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

- 1 Samuel 30:6b

David strengthened himself in the Lord! He talked his problem out with God! I'm sure David reminded God of his circumstances ("God, do you see what I'm going through?") and of his identity ("Do you remember that I belong to you?") And then, I'm sure the Lord reminded David of His perspective ("I'm at work") and of his identity ("I am the God who saves"), and the Lord strengthened David! And you know what? You can do what David did. You can do this when you are having your absolute worst day! You can strengthen yourself in the Lord! Many times I've felt like I'm at the end of my rope, and I pray. God doesn't fix everything, but He strengthens me. He somehow reminds me of his perspective and His identity, and it changes things. And it changed things for David. Look what happens

And David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." (The ephod was a part of the Apron that a chief priest wore. We don't know exactly how it worked, but God used the ephod regularly to communicate with the Kings of Israel when they had a difficult decision to make. And here God communicates with David). So Abiathar brought the ephod to David. And David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them?" God answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue.

- 1 Samuel 30:7-8

So David strengthened himself in the Lord, and the Lord gives David direction. Now, notice there's a lot that David doesn't know at this point. He doesn't know how far the Amalekites have gone, and he doesn't know where they are. He only knows that God has told him to start pursuing. So that's what he does. After hiking 55 miles from the battle to Ziklag, after crying

until they had no strength left David and his 600 men take off following the trail as best they can. And as they go God provides something else David needs:

David gains a guide.

So David and his men were pushing hard to catch up to the Amalekites. But when they had run about sixteen miles, they hit a roadblock: a huge ravine called “the Brook of Besor.” This is the deepest ravine in the entire area. Two hundred of David’s men were just too exhausted to keep going. Nobody has a clue how far they will have to go or even where these Amalekites are. So these guys have to give up the chase. But God told David to pursue the Amalekites, so he and four hundred of his men keep going. Just as they cross the Brook of Besor while they’re out in the wilderness in the middle of nowhere, guess what they find? Look at:

They found an Egyptian in the open country and brought him to David. And they gave him bread and he ate. They gave him water to drink, and they gave him a piece of a cake of figs and two clusters of raisins. And when he had eaten, his spirit revived, for he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights.

- 1 Samuel 30:11-12

This guy was at death’s door! And even though they are in a hurry, David’s men feed him and revive him. They show him kindness. Then look at what it says:

And David said to him, “To whom do you belong? And where are you from?” He said, “I am a young man of Egypt, servant to an Amalekite, and my master left me behind because I fell sick 3 days ago. We had made a raid against the Negeb of the Cherethites and against that which belongs to Judah and against the Negeb of Caleb and we burned Ziklag with fire.”

- 1 Samuel 30:13-14

This Egyptian, who had probably been captured in a raid himself, was involved in the raid at Ziklag. Look at:

And David said to him, “Will you take me down to this band?” And he said, “Swear to me by God that you will not kill me or deliver me into the hands of my master, and I will take you down to this band.”

- 1 Samuel 30:15

Just imagine: You’re in the desert in the middle of nowhere. You run into a random Egyptian, and he just happens to be the one guy that can lead you to the enemy. Now that is a step up. David gains a guide. But the good news isn’t finished yet:

David gains his family, his possessions, and a whole lot more!

So the Egyptian leads David and his men right to the Amalekites. When David and his men find the Amalekites, they are drunk, they are celebrating, and they are scattered. They're so sure that David is at the war that they haven't even posted a guard!

So David's men catch the Amalekites, and they attack them ferociously for twenty four straight hours! They beat them so bad that only 400 Amalekites escape. In fact, they beat them so bad that the Amalekites are not even mentioned again in the Bible for three hundred years! Then look at what we're told:

David recovered all that the Amalekites had taken, and David rescued his two wives. Nothing was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken. David brought back all.

- 1 Samuel 30:18-19

David recovered his family. He recovered his possessions, and he recovered a lot, lot more! The Amalekites had raided from the entire area: Judah, Philistia and the surrounding areas. David recovered far more plunder than he ever lost! In fact, he recovered so much stuff that he rewarded the four hundred men who fought with him. He rewarded the two hundred men who stopped at the Brook of Besor. He sent very generous gifts to the leaders of at least fifteen cities in Judah, sharing with his fellow Israelites what God had given him. He said "David sends you a gift from the plunder of the Lord's enemies."

So things are getting better for David. But you know what? The story's not done yet. There's one more piece of the story. David gains 1) strength from the Lord, 2) a guide, and 3) his family, his possessions, and much much more. The fourth step up:

David gains resolution with Saul.

David has been running from Saul for years. David has refused to fight back, but Saul keeps trying to kill him. As readers, we wonder "Is this ever going to end? How will this be resolved?" Well, it does end. It ends in 1 Samuel 31. God took Saul out of the way, and He did it in a way that made sure David could be the next King.

Remember the battle against the Philistines that David wanted to fight in? Well, David couldn't be in it. He got kicked out, and it's a good thing. He had to fight the Amalekites. But Saul was in that battle. And in that battle, Saul and his sons were killed. The Philistines defeated Israel. They killed Saul's sons, and they killed Saul.

This is exactly what David predicted in last week's story (if you remember that). He said "Maybe Saul will go down into battle and perish." And that's exactly what happened. And at that moment, David got resolution with Saul. Saul died, and his conflict with David was resolved by God without David having to lift a finger.

So that's the story of 1 Samuel 27-31: four steps down and four steps up. David took four steps to the worst day of his life:

- 1) He lost his country.
- 2) He lost his chance to be a hero.
- 3) He lost his family and possessions.
- 4) He lost his men.

And then David went through four steps to the fulfillment of God's Promise:

- 1) He gained strength.
- 2) He gained a guide.
- 3) He gained his family, possessions, and more.
- 4) He gained resolution with Saul.

Now the question is: What is the point of this big story? What does God want us to learn from the story of 1 Samuel 27-31? Well I think the point is kind of simple: God is always at work. God is at work for the good of His people all the time. God is at work on our best days, and He's at work on our worst days. God is always at work for the good of His people.

Think about our story. We can see that God is at work on the steps up in the "good things," right? It's obvious that God was at work when he strengthened David and told him to pursue, right? It's obvious that God was at work when he provided the Egyptian. It's obvious that God was at work when He gave David victory over the Amalekites. And it's obvious that God was at work when Saul and his dynasty were dealt with. God resolved the situation just like David said He would! We can see God's hand in the steps up anyone can see that, right?

The real trick the thing God wants us to learn from this passage is to see that God is at work on the steps down. We need to see him at work on our worst days! We see that in the story: God was at work in every one of the seemingly bad things David went through, every one of the bad things was needed to get to the good things.

When David lost his country and stayed with the Philistines, God was at work. That's where David learned great military strategy. When David and his men went on those raids from Philistia, they learned to operate as an organized army. God was at work! When David couldn't be a hero and was kicked out of the battle between Israel and the Philistines, God was at work. David didn't want to be kicked out, but God had other plans. God wanted to get David out of the way, so he could deal with Saul. Because God took David out of the battle, Israel could trust him. Think with me: If David had been in the battle, especially if he had started out on the side of the Philistines as he planned to and Saul was killed, people would have had serious questions about David's loyalty. He would have been suspect, and he probably wouldn't have become king. But God took David out of the battle, so there would be no questions. God was at work. Even when David's family was taken by the Amalekites, God was at work. As hard as that was, the Amalekites were necessary for the fulfillment of God's promises. Because if the Amalekites

hadn't kidnapped David's family, he never would have gone after them. If David hadn't gone after the Amalekites, he wouldn't have recovered all that extra plunder.

The whole time the Amalekites were raiding in Judah and Philistia and the surrounding areas, what they were really doing was taking up a giant love offering so David could play Santa Claus and give it to Judah. He gave the cities of Judah huge gifts before he knew that Saul had died. Do you know the very next thing that happens in David's story? They make him king! And guess who is the very first to declare David King? The cities in Judah that he sent gifts to. See, God was at work.

The point is God was at work in all of it, in the steps up and the steps down, in the things that seemed good, and in the things that seemed bad. The worst day of David's life was a day where God was working powerfully!

That's what God wants us to learn from this story. God is at work always. If you're going through a bad time, this story is not a promise that tomorrow things are going to turn around for you. That's not the point, because you don't know where in this cycle you are at. You might still have a ways to go before you get to the bottom. It took David ten plus hard years before he got to the bottom and things turned around.

The point isn't that things are going to turn around tomorrow. The point is that they ARE going to turn around. There is going to be a time, maybe days from now, maybe weeks from now, maybe years from now, but there will come a time when you start taking steps up to the fulfillment of God's promises for you, a time is coming when life is going to make sense again and when hard work is going to pay off again and when obedience is going to be rewarded again.

When that happens it will be easy once again to see God at work. But the passage tells us to look for it right now. It teaches us to look for God to be at work no matter where we're at. He's at work on your best day and he's at work on your worst day. That's what we learn from this passage.

And to remind us of that today, we are going to close our teaching time in a little bit different way. We're going to do some call and response. I'm going to say a phrase and when I point at you I want you to say "God is at work." On my best day, on my worst day, when my marriage is easy and strong, when my marriage is difficult and fragile, when my kids respect me, when my kids reject me, when answers are clear, when answers are nowhere to be found, when I feel like a good strong Christian, when I feel like a weak terrible Christian, at all times, at all times, at ALL times.