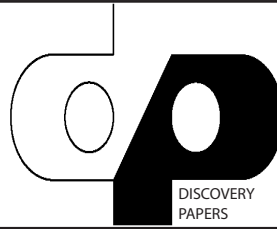


NIGHT MISSION

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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1 Samuel 25:1–44
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1 Samuel 26:1–25

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean, an ex-convict, is hounded by Inspector Javert. In the musical based on the novel, Valjean sings that he's become a "dog on the run." Weary, he sings:

I'll escape now from the world,
From the world of Jean Valjean.
Jean Valjean is nothing now!
Another story must begin!¹

Valjean begins "another story": he changes his identity. Likewise, David, hounded by Saul, felt something like a dog on the run. He didn't begin another story, however. He didn't change his identity. He more or less tried that once before, by the way, pretending he was insane before Achish, the king of Gath. Such an approach was not likely to work with Saul, however. Instead of beginning another story, David, weary of the chase, tries to change the course of the story.

How do you respond when you come against someone like Javert or someone like Saul: someone who, in one way or another, has it in for you? How do you respond when you're a victim of wrongdoing?

Golden opportunity

1 Samuel 26:1-8:

Then the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is not David hiding himself on the hill of Hachilah, which is on the east of Jeshimon?" 2 So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand chosen men of Israel to seek David in the wilderness of Ziph. 3 And Saul encamped on the hill of Hachilah, which is beside the road on the east of Jeshimon. But David remained in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, 4 David sent out spies and learned that Saul had indeed come. 5 Then David rose and came to the place where Saul had encamped. And David saw the place

where Saul lay, with Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army. Saul was lying within the encampment, while the army was encamped around him.

6 Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the son of Zeruiah, "Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you." 7 So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and Abner and the army lay around him. 8 Then Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice."

The Ziphites rat out David again, just as they did in 1 Samuel 23:19. When they informed on David the last time, Saul closed in on David, but he had to break off his pursuit to fight off the Philistines (1 Samuel 23:27-28). Saul's three thousand men vastly outnumber David's army, but they were little help when he resumed his pursuit of David in the wilderness of Engedi (1 Samuel 24:1-2). Instead of running from Saul, as he did in 1 Samuel 23:26, or hiding from Saul, as he did in 1 Samuel 24:3, David advances toward Saul, just as Saul had advanced toward him. This is no longer David hiding out in the cave of Engedi. This is David taking the fight—or taking something—to Saul. The hunted becomes the hunter.

Abishai, David's nephew, volunteers to accompany David on his night mission into Saul's camp. But what is the nature of the mission? David doesn't say. Perhaps Abishai thinks he's signing up for a dangerous commando raid: go in, kill Saul and maybe Abner, his general, and get out. Then again, David had the opportunity to kill Saul when the king wandered in to the cave of Engedi, but David only cut off a piece of his robe. Then again, maybe David has had a change of heart and now recognizes that he let a golden opportunity slip through his fingers. What other reason could David have for sneaking into Saul's camp other than to do away with Saul and put his troubles behind him?

David and Abishai come upon Saul, who is fast asleep, with his spear stuck in the ground near his head. What an opportunity! A weapon that could do away with Saul is right next to his head! And it's not just any weapon; it's Saul's own spear, which he has hurled at David multiple times. Wouldn't David relish the chance to kill Saul with the very weapon that Saul has used to try to kill him? And all he has to do is pick it up out of the ground, move it a few inches, and, uh, reinsert it.

Abishai recognizes the situation as an opportunity, anyway—a God-given opportunity: “God has given your enemy into your hand this day.” Likewise, David's men had concluded that God arranged for Saul to wander in to the cave of Engedi so that David could do away with him. David didn't capitalize then. How about now? If David, for whatever reason, is reluctant, then Abishai offers to do the honors: “Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice.”

Wouldn't that be sweet? In 1 Samuel 18:11, Saul tried to “pin” David to the wall with his spear—twice. Now Abishai offers to “pin” Saul to the earth, and he, unlike Saul, won't have to strike twice, and Saul, unlike David, won't escape. Talk about poetic justice! Moreover, didn't David use Goliath's sword against him? Why not use Saul's spear against him? How about it, David?

More confidence, deeper convictions

1 Samuel 26:9-12:

But David said to Abishai, “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?” 10 And David said, “As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. 11 The Lord forbid that I should put out my hand against the Lord's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head and the jar of water, and let us go.” 12 So David took the spear and the jar of water from Saul's head, and they went away. No man saw it or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen upon them.

Just as he did when he declined to capitalize on his opportunity in the cave of Engedi, David cites an imperative about not putting one's hand out against “the Lord's anointed” (1 Samuel 24:6). The Lord's anointed, of course, would be Saul, who was anointed by Samuel as king of Israel. But hasn't the Lord promised to remove

Saul as king, and hasn't Samuel anointed David as the new king? Well, yes, but David has determined that it's not his prerogative to do the removing and enthroning. In fact, he's more determined than he was in 1 Samuel 24 to leave the timing of Saul's removal to the Lord, even if it means being hounded by Saul for who knows how long.

David won't strike Saul, and David won't let Abishai strike Saul. David concludes that “the Lord will strike him” or that he will die in some way. We didn't hear this from David when he let Saul walk out of the cave of Engedi. Since Engedi, he's not only become more determined to leave the timing of Saul's removal in the Lord's hands, he's also become more confident that the Lord will do away with Saul in some way at some point.

Instead of putting out his hand against Saul, David, not Abishai, puts out his hand and takes Saul's spear, along with his jar of water, and departs. David doesn't take anything from Saul's person; he doesn't cut off the edge of his robe; he doesn't touch the Lord's anointed. He does, however, leave with the spear and water jar of the Lord's anointed.

How were David and Abishai able to carry out their mission without waking any of the three thousand men in the camp? The Lord is with David. The Lord had caused a deep sleep to fall upon Saul and his men, protecting David and Abishai.

David has learned. First, he's more confident in the Lord—so confident that he takes the initiative with Saul, so confident that he envisions the Lord bringing an end to Saul at some point. Second, his convictions run deeper. In the cave of Engedi, David cut off a piece of Saul's robe; in the camp, David doesn't touch Saul.

Who taught David? Abigail taught him. David, infuriated by Nabal's treatment of him, and perhaps channeling his anger toward Saul, was about to kill Nabal and his men, but Abigail, courageously, wisely, and artfully, intervened. David praised Abigail for keeping him from “bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand.” David didn't strike Nabal; the Lord struck Nabal and he died—ten days after David was about to strike him (1 Samuel 25:33, 38).

Don't retaliate

In his dealings with Saul, both in 1 Samuel 24 and 26, David is compelled by one inviolable imperative: do not put out your hand against the Lord's anointed. What, likewise, compels us, now that Jesus Christ, Son of David, has come? As much as I'd like to apply David's imperative as some people do—as a prohibition against

criticizing pastors, the “Lord’s anointed,” so-called—I would not draw such a parallel. Now that Christ and the Spirit have come, all believers in Christ are anointed by the Spirit. Spiritual leaders occupy no special class that makes them untouchable.

Instead, the parallel I would draw is with **Romans 12:17-19**, where the apostle Paul channels Proverbs 20:22 and 24:29:

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

Like David, don’t retaliate. Why? Victims of wrongdoing are not impartial. They don’t have all the facts. They can’t see into the hearts of wrongdoers. Victims of wrongdoing make poor judges. Only God, who knows all and sees all, is qualified to judge. Therefore, if you’re a victim of wrongdoing, don’t retaliate. Don’t backstab. Don’t bad-mouth. Don’t abuse. Don’t settle the score. Put away the sword—or the spear. This doesn’t mean that you put away your desire for justice; it means that you leave vengeance to the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-loving judge.

Circumstances may make it appear as if God has given your enemy into your hand to do with what you will, to put all your troubles behind you, but the Scriptures must guide us, not circumstances. A golden opportunity to retaliate against an enemy is in fact a golden opportunity to trust the Lord.

Like David, Valjean had an opportunity to kill his enemy, who had hunted him across the years. In fact, his comrades on the barricades, who handed Javert over to Valjean, expected him to do away with his enemy, just as David’s men expected him to do away with Saul. But Valjean didn’t retaliate. He could have put his troubles behind him, but he refused to settle the score.

Abishai might want to know, and we might want to know, if the risky night mission into enemy camp wasn’t for the purpose of putting an end to Saul, then what was it for? And why take the spear and the water jar? Is that what the whole thing was about—go in, steal a spear and a jar, and get out? Is that why David asked Abishai to risk his life—for a spear and a jar?

Challenging Abner

1 Samuel 26:13-16:

Then David went over to the other side and stood far off on the top of the hill, with a great space between them. 14 And David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, “Will you not answer, Abner?” Then Abner answered, “Who are you who calls to the king?” 15 And David said to Abner, “Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. 16 This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord’s anointed. And now see where the king’s spear is and the jar of water that was at his head.”

When David, after cutting the edge of Saul’s robe, confronted the king, he did so in the proximity of Saul, even bowing down before him. Now, he puts a “great space” between Saul and him. When David confronts Saul this time, he doesn’t make himself vulnerable. He has nothing to apologize for this time; he hasn’t touched the Lord’s anointed. David stands on solid ground, emotionally distant from Saul.

What does David want? He wants to be free of Saul. He’s weary of being hounded. He could have liberated himself from Saul—twice—but he has determined that it is not his prerogative to take his enemy’s life. So he uses symbolic actions—cutting the edge of a robe, taking a spear and a jar—and artful speech in an attempt to persuade Saul to bury the hatchet.

From across a canyon, David calls out—but not to Saul. He calls out to Saul’s army and, more specifically, to Abner, the general of Saul’s army. David is not only weary of being hounded by Saul, he’s also weary of being hounded by Saul’s army. By speaking to Abner, not to Saul, he’s showing up the general and the army, even suggesting that Abner deserves to die for his failure to protect Saul. Perhaps David is hoping Abner will carry out sentence on himself or that Saul will order his execution.

Although David calls out to Abner, indirectly he calls out to Saul. Direct, up-close speech didn’t cause Saul to bury the hatchet in 1 Samuel 24. Now, David employs a more artful approach: indirect speech from a distance. By speaking to Abner and by inviting Abner to behold the spear and the jar, he’s also inviting Saul to behold the spear and jar—and to know that he would be a dead man

if not for David's reticence. The spear and the jar are not simply evidence that David could have killed Saul; they also have symbolic value. The spear means power, and the jar of water means life. David had the power to take Saul's life but didn't.

David, in calling out to Abner, has gotten Saul's attention.

Challenging Saul

1 Samuel 26:17-20:

Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord, O king." 18 And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? 19 Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the Lord, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth away from the presence of the Lord, for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains."

Saul, just as he did when David confronted him in 1 Samuel 24, says, "Is this your voice, my son David?" (1 Samuel 24:16) By all appearances, Saul is sincere in the moment. He harbors mostly hidden affections for David that surface at certain times—but only for a time. David, though he called Saul "my father" in 1 Samuel 24:11, this time keeps his emotional distance, addressing Saul in a less intimate, more formal way.

Now that he has Saul's attention, David makes his case. David asks Saul, "For what have I done?" It's not the first time Saul has heard such words. The prophet Samuel, after Saul disobeyed the Lord, asked him, "What have you done?" Samuel then told Saul that he would be removed as king and replaced by another (1 Samuel 13:11-14). Saul's son Jonathan, pleading David's case before Saul, asked, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" (1 Samuel 20:32) Saul hears—or should hear—the words of Samuel and Jonathan in David's words. Saul, what have you done? What has David done to deserve this kind of treatment? By twice refusing to kill Saul when he had the chance, David proves that he means Saul no harm. On the contrary, David has blessed Saul, giving him back his life.

Has the Lord stirred up Saul against David? No. Have men stirred up Saul? No. David, by not articulating the third possibility—Saul has stirred himself up—leaves room for Saul to come that conclusion himself.

Can Saul see what he's done? "They" have not driven David out; Saul has driven David out. What has the king of the Lord's people done? In driving David from the land, where the Lord has made his dwelling, Saul has in effect urged David to worship the gods of other lands. Saul's persecution of David, if unchecked, will cause the death of one of the Lord's people, one whom Saul calls "my son," away from the land of the Lord.

David likens himself to a "single flea," as he did in 1 Samuel 26:20, and now also to a "partridge in the mountains." On the one hand, David is saying, isn't it a little ridiculous to deploy three thousand men to track down and kill a man who's as harmless as a flea or a partridge? On the other hand, David jumps from cave to cave, like a flea jumps from animal to animal, and he seemingly blends in with his surroundings, flies close to the ground, and hides himself, like a partridge. On the one hand, David is saying, "I'm not worth the effort, because I'm only one man and I have done no evil." On the other hand, David is saying, "I'm not so easy to find, am I?"

How about it, Saul?

Separate ways

1 Samuel 26:21-25:

Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake." 22 And David answered and said, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and take it. 23 The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for the Lord gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the Lord's anointed. 24 Behold, as your life was precious this day in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the Lord, and may he deliver me out of all tribulation." 25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

Saul confesses—and not for the first time. He confessed when Samuel confronted him, and he confessed when David confronted him earlier. Saul urges David to “return” to the court, a word that can also be translated “repent.” It’s Saul, not David who needs not simply to confess but to also repent, to back up his confession with a change of course.

David, aloof from Saul, stands his ground. He will not return; he will only let Saul’s spear return, provided that a young man comes across the canyon to retrieve it. David doesn’t need Saul’s spear, just as he didn’t need Saul’s armor for his showdown with Goliath (1 Samuel 17:39). Saul’s spear, though a symbol of power, also represents his impotence. He’s been ineffective with it. It even could have been used against him while he slept. Saul can have it back, for all the good it will do him. As for real power, that will be taken from him, just as easily as David took the spear from him. David will not return the water jar, however; Saul will have to find other refreshment if he wishes to resume his pursuit of David.

As for David, he will trust the Lord to vindicate him, for the Lord “rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness.” David’s righteousness and faithfulness are evident in that he refused to put out his hand against the Lord’s anointed, though doing so would have brought him untold relief. David entrusts himself to the Lord, not Saul. Will David’s artful appeal cause Saul to turn away from unrighteousness and unfaithfulness and break off his pursuit of David?

Saul, in one of his lucid moments, all but crowns David. David, though, goes his way in the wilderness, distancing himself from Saul. David doesn’t “return”; Saul returns. Does Saul repent? Not likely. He returns “to his place.” He returns to where he came from. He confessed, but in the end, he’s back in the same place. Talk is cheap. David and Saul go their separate ways.

Why did David sneak in to Saul’s camp? To take Saul’s spear and jar and make a statement. What else can he do? He will not allow himself to kill Saul. All he can do to get Saul to break off his pursuit is use persuasion. The statement is this: 1) I mean you no harm. 2) I have power over you, even the power of life and death, but I have not used it. In fact, I have given you back your life. 3) As the Lord’s king, his representative, you have in effect told me to worship other gods by driving me from his presence. 4) The Lord is with me and will vindicate me, not you, if you persist in unrighteousness and unfaithfulness. For these reasons, stop your pursuit of me.

Bless your enemy

Don’t retaliate. Leave vengeance to the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-loving judge.

Is there anything we can do? The apostle Paul again, this time channeling Proverbs 25:21-22: “To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20-21). Instead of retaliating, bless your enemy. Isn’t this what David did? He spared Saul. He showed him mercy. He gave Saul back his life. If you bless your enemy, you could contribute to your enemy’s repentance. By the way, in 1 Samuel 30, David will literally feed an enemy and give him something to drink (1 Samuel 30:11-12).

When we retaliate, we are “overcome by evil”: it rebounds off of us and stays in circulation. When we bless our enemies, we “overcome evil with good”: we absorb evil and take it out of circulation. Evil shudders in the face of goodness that blesses an enemy. This kind of goodness—the love of the abused for the abuser—conquers the world.

Blessing your enemy, by the way, doesn’t necessarily mean biting your tongue. David spoke the truth to Saul. But oftentimes, when conflict is involved, a more subtle and nuanced presentation of the truth is more effective. David, for example, employed indirect speech, symbolism, echoes, and questions, allowing Saul to come to his own conclusion.

At one point in my life, I rented a house with four other men in Pleasanton, in the East Bay. All of us were single, in our twenties or early-thirties. Most of us were involved in youth ministry. One morning, Greg, one of my housemates, was about to leave for work when he realized that the man who lived across the street had blocked our driveway with his car. Greg walked across the street and knocked on the door. The man fumed, “I just wanted to see if any of you guys had the [guts] to come over here and do anything about it! Ever since you guys moved in, you’ve ruined the neighborhood!” For our neighbor, ruining the neighborhood meant taking up too many parking spots.

This exchange could have escalated in a hurry, but Greg, even though his manhood was challenged, responded in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. He said that he was involved in Young Life, an outreach ministry to high school students. He said another resident of our house

was a youth intern at a church. He said that I hosted a weekly Bible study for high school students at our house. As a consequence, lots of people, including high school students, were stopping by our house, and occasionally taking up a few of the parking spaces along our street. As Greg was talking, our neighbor's wife, who was listening to the exchange, turned to her husband and said, "Honey! Honey! It's a Bible study!"

I don't know what our neighbor thought was going on at our house, but apparently, he concluded that a Bible study was innocuous enough. It occurs to me now that one of the things we were doing at our house was building into teenagers in the hopes that they would grow up to be good neighbors, men and women who loved their neighbors as themselves. In any event, from that point on, when our neighbor saw us coming or going, he would smile and wave at us. Greg didn't retaliate, but he didn't bite his tongue, either. He simply informed our neighbor in a non-defensive manner and allowed him to come to his own conclusion whether we were ruining the neighborhood.

Neither does blessing your enemy mean returning for more abuse. David, for example, distanced himself from Saul, both spatially and emotionally. Neither does blessing your enemy mean enabling your enemy. David, for example, kept Saul's water jar, thereby inhibiting Saul's pursuit of him.

Jean Valjean, when given the opportunity to kill Javert, refused to retaliate. Earlier in his life, he was treated with grace after stealing a bishop's silver, and now he extends the same grace to Javert. Valjean spares Javert and lets him go free. Valjean blesses his enemy. Valjean gives Javert back his life. Shocked, Javert sings:

It was his hour at last
To put a seal on my fate
Wipe out the past
And wash me clean off the slate!
All it would take
Was a flick of his knife.
Vengeance was his and he gave me back my life.²

Alas, Javert, shuddering in the face of goodness, cannot receive grace: he stands on a bridge over the River Seine and throws himself off. He puts an end to his story.

Actualize the imperatives

Don't retaliate. Bless your enemy. These imperatives challenge us to the core. How is it possible to actualize them in our lives?

Can you receive grace? Do you know you need grace? Consider the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Like his namesake, he undertook a dangerous night mission into the enemy's camp: "the Ancient of Days disguised as a newborn."³ Why? To give us what we deserve for what we've done to him? To run us through with one stroke of the spear? To be done with us, to put his troubles behind him, to put an end to this awful human enterprise once and for all?

No! No! No! He had the power—even the right—not only to take our lives but also to condemn us for all eternity, but he did not do it. He didn't run us through. Instead, we ran him through: "But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear" (John 19:34). Instead of taking our lives, he gave up his life to give us back our lives—and so much more. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

If you don't yet know Christ, and are uncertain of your eternal destiny can you receive grace? Can you receive him? Can you? Will you?

Don't retaliate against your enemies, because God has not retaliated against you, and bless your enemies, because God has blessed you. We love, even our enemies, because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

(Endnotes)

- 1 Herbert Kretzmer, "What Have I Done?"
- 2 Herbert Kretzmer, "Javert's Suicide."
- 3 Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 91.