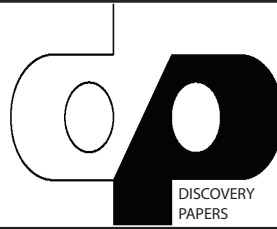


UNDERCOVER DILEMMA

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



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1 Samuel 29:1-11
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1 Samuel 29:1-11

One of the most popular storylines in movies and television revolves around conflict that happens when someone goes undercover. Pretending to be someone else for the sake of getting information or thwarting plans can lead to all sorts of tricky questions.

That kind of situation happens in the movie series *Fast and Furious*. The first movie features a police officer, Brian, who goes undercover in order to infiltrate a smuggling ring. While he is undercover, Brian befriends Dom, the guy he's trying to arrest and falls in love with Dom's sister, Mia.

A few movies later, Brian returns as an FBI agent, and tries to rebuild some of the bridges that he burned while working undercover. Listen to this scene where he confronts Mia before his cover was blown.

“Maybe you're lying to yourself. Maybe you're not the good guy pretending to be the bad guy. Maybe you're the bad guy pretending to be the good guy.”¹

This is the question that our movies and our television stories like to ask: When you pretend to be someone else, are you really pretending? Are you really who you think you are?

We like this question because we're constantly asking it of ourselves. Are we good guys? Or, are we bad guys? Most of us think of ourselves as pretty good people, all things considered. But what if we really aren't? What is really true of us?

Today we're continuing our series in the life of David called *A Life of Passion*. We've tracked with David through his younger years as a shepherd. We saw him anointed as king. For the last few months, we've seen him as a fugitive. He's been running for his life from the current king, Saul, who is trying to kill him.

But two weeks ago, David changed his strategy. He went over to Achish, the king of Gath and he joined forces with him. Achish gave him a Philistine city to call

his own and David settled down there. David has been hiding out among the Philistines. His actions make us question who he is becoming.

In our story this morning, we see David facing the kind of ethical dilemma that people face when they go undercover. Whose side is he really on? Has he become what he is pretending to be? Today we see David's undercover dilemma.

Our story is found in 1 Samuel 29. It's an unsettling story because it leaves a lot of unanswered questions. We see David caught in a difficult situation and we don't know what he is going to do. We've seen enough of David by this point to know that he is capable of great honor, but also tremendous mistakes. We're not sure which David will show up here.

As we wonder about what David will do, we are invited into wondering the same thing about ourselves. What if we were in his place? What would we do? Would we be a good guy? Or, would we be the bad guy? How well do we know ourselves?

As it turns out, something happens in the story that causes us to never actually find out what David would have done. We're faced with the idea that maybe we've been asking the wrong question all along. Maybe there is something else going on altogether that we missed.

Let's take a look at David's dilemma and see what we can find out about ourselves.

The Conflict

Last week we saw the beginning of what will be a decisive battle between the Philistines and Israel. In the first few verses of 1 Samuel 28, Achish told David that he expected him to go to war alongside him. David gave an enigmatic answer in 1 Samuel 28:2, “Very well, you shall know what your servant can do.”

Then we saw Saul panic about this upcoming battle and visit a witch to get advice. He learns that Israel will lose the battle and that he and his sons will die. The scene

change again, going back to Achish and the Philistines mustering for battle. Here is 1 Samuel 29:1: “Now the Philistines had gathered all their forces at Aphek. And the Israelites were encamped by the spring that is in Jezreel.”

Everything is ready. The armies are lined up. They are ready to face off. This battle mirrors an earlier battle recorded in 1 Samuel 4 when the Philistines also gathered at Aphek: the same location. The results of that battle were disastrous. Thirty thousand Israelites died. The ark of God was captured. The sons of Eli were killed. It was a terrible day.

We’ve already heard the prophecy from Samuel through the witch that this day won’t be any better. We are dreading what is going to happen.

Then David comes into the scene in **1 Samuel verses 2-3:**

As the lords of the Philistines were passing on by hundreds and by thousands, and David and his men were passing on in the rear with Achish, 3 the commanders of the Philistines said, “What are these Hebrews doing here?” And Achish said to the commanders of the Philistines, “Is this not David, the servant of Saul, king of Israel, who has been with me now for days and years, and since he deserted to me I have found no fault in him to this day.”

Everyone is lined up for a final inspection. The lords of the Philistines were walking by all the troops, making sure everything is in order. Then they see David and his men. “Hebrews” is a derogatory way that the nations used to refer to the Israelites. The Philistines do not want Hebrews going to war with them to fight the Hebrews.

Achish tries to come to David’s defense. He claims that David has defected from his prior master Saul, the king of Israel. He says that he has “found no fault in him to this day.” That’s a true statement. Achish hasn’t found any fault, but it isn’t because no faults are there.

In reality, David has been lying to Achish. We heard about this two weeks ago. David has been leading raids against the enemies of Israel, completely destroying them. But he’s been telling Achish that he’s fighting against the allies of Israel, or Israel themselves. Achish thinks he has abandoned his own people when in reality David has been helping them from the other side.

Now we are getting close to a really tricky decision for David. What will he do if he goes to war alongside the Philistines? Would he really fight against his own people? This is his undercover dilemma. This is where we would find out who David really is.

Fast and Furious isn’t the only movie to ask these kinds of questions. Most stories with an undercover character have this kind of a moment. An undercover police officer is asked to kill an innocent person. An informant is called out and has to defend herself. A spy betrays one side and we wonder which side they are really faithful to.

Why do we like stories about these kinds of ambiguous moral situations? I think it’s because we experience them in our own lives. Do you face uncertain situations?

Some decisions in life are pretty obvious. We face choices where there is clearly a right and a wrong decision. That doesn’t always mean it is easy to *make* the right choice, but we can at least recognize what we ought to do.

In my experience though, I face a lot of decisions where it can be hard to figure out which choice is right and which choice is wrong. Should I spend money on this or save it or give it away? Do I reach out to this person or not? Am I helping them or enabling them? How much work is too much work? How much play is too much play?

In David’s case, he faced this uncertain situation because he had already made a bad decision by hiding out among the Philistines. That was a moment of weakness. But while he’s been there, he’s been trying to be on God’s side. That’s why he’s been fighting Israel’s enemies. Now he finds himself caught in his own trap.

We face these kinds of situations too. We’ve made mistakes in the past and we’re not sure how to recover from them. The consequences of financial choices or sexual choices or relationship issues continue to affect our lives today. It’s not always clear how to resolve those things. So many things in life are murky.

In 2011, there was an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled “Ethical Breakdowns.” The authors were trying to figure out how companies ended up making unethical decisions when none of the individuals really knew how bad things had gotten.

They concluded that most of those cases weren't due to what they called "out and out crooks." Instead,

"Much more often, we believe, employees bend or break ethics rules because those in charge are blind to unethical behavior and may even unknowingly encourage it."

Does that sort of thing happen to us? When we face these murky decisions do we end up justifying bad choices? Sometimes we aren't even aware of the right path. How do we know we aren't becoming blind and getting in deeper and deeper over our heads? As we make these decisions, who are we becoming? Good guys? Or bad guys?

I think that's what David is wondering. Let's see how he handles it.

Three Speeches

As the story continues, three different characters make speeches highlighting the predicament that David is about to face. First, the Philistine commanders speak. They make their case against David. Then Achish speaks to David. Finally, David responds to Achish and tries to explain himself. Let's start by hearing what the Philistine commanders have to say.

1 Samuel 29:4-5:

But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with him. And the commanders of the Philistines said to him, "Send the man 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 lord? Would it not be with the heads of the men here? 5 Is not this David, of whom they sing to one another in dances,

'Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'"

The commanders demand that Achish send David away. They say he could earn Saul's favor by turning on them and cutting off their heads. They are probably remembering how he decapitated Goliath after defeating him.

The David they know is an enemy of the Philistines.

Achish realizes that it's not worth making his commanders mad to insist that David be allowed to fight with them. So he turns to David and asks him to relent.

1 Samuel 29:6-7:

Then Achish called David and said to him, "As the Lord lives, you have been honest, and to me it seems right that you should march out and in with me in the campaign. For I have found nothing wrong in you from the day of your coming to me to this day. Nevertheless, the lords do not approve of you. 7 So go back now; and go peaceably, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines."

Achish repeats that he "has found nothing wrong in" David. He believes in David so much that he references David's God by the personal name of YHWH when he says "as the LORD lives."

The David that Achish knows is loyal to him.

And now, David responds in verse 8

And David said to Achish, "But what have I done? What have you found in your servant from the day I entered your service until now, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?"

This isn't what we would expect David to do. He had a great opportunity to get out of this dilemma. Why would he insist on fighting? He seems to be making his situation worse.

But we're still unsure of his intentions because he continues to be vague. He says that he wants to "go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king." It's clear that Achish assumes that David is loyal to him. But we wonder which king he is referring to. Is it Achish? Is it Saul? Is it God himself? We don't know.

We're left in the dark. We're not sure how this is going to end. Achish is swearing by YHWH and David is begging to go into battle against the Israelites. Who is the good guy and who is the bad guy?

Maybe David wants to go into battle and turn on the Philistines. Or maybe David is going to be the one to kill Saul. Or maybe David is going to intervene and try to save Saul? Or maybe he has no idea what he's doing. It is possible that David doesn't even have a plan. I wonder if David kicked himself after saying this to Achish. Was he just caught up in the moment so that he got defensive and said something without thinking?

I really resonate with David here. Sometimes I get into situations without knowing what I'll do when I get there. Sometimes I have the chance to get out of a bad situation and I don't take it. Sometimes I manage to make things worse instead of better. When it's all over, sometimes I can't even explain the choices I made. Often I look back and wish I had done it differently.

Do you ever feel that kind of self-doubt? Do you look back at choices you have made and wonder why you did it that way? Do you wonder whether you made the right choice? Do you doubt yourself?

A good story invites you to wonder about what's going on inside the characters. It's purely speculation, but I think that David is playing this whole situation by ear. I don't think he has a plan. I think he wants to see how it will all play out. I'm not sure he is making the best choices here, but I do think there is something we can learn from him.

What I like about David is that he doesn't seem to be afraid of this really complicated situation that he has gotten himself into. It's actually pretty remarkable. If I were in this situation, I think I'd be literally shaking. I wouldn't know what to do. I'd be terrified that Achish would discover my deception and that the commanders would kill me on the spot.

But there is something about David that makes him confident enough to charge ahead without having it all thought through. I think that is one of David's strengths at this point in his life.

We'll come to see that, David loses this confidence as he gets older. This decisiveness. Later on, after making a lot of mistakes, he doesn't act this way anymore. He becomes passive. Every decision is drawn out and takes forever. He seems terrified of making the wrong decision, so he doesn't do anything at all.

But here David seems, well, fearless. Even a little reckless. Maybe in his head he doubts his decisions, but at least he makes them.

As a pastor, I interact with many people after they make mistakes. I can usually relate because I make plenty of mistakes. But just as often, I interact with people who are scared of making mistakes. They don't want to do anything because they might do it poorly. They don't want to get into tricky situations where they won't know what to do. They certainly don't want to be tempted in ways that they aren't sure they'll be able to handle.

I meet a lot of people who are terrified to make a decision that they might question later. Do you ever feel this way? Frozen by the fear of making a mistake?

I see a lot of this in myself. I see a lot of it in our church. A kind of Christian perfectionism. An inability to act because we are so concerned that all our decisions have to be perfect. An excruciating process of self-doubt when we do make decisions that might have been a mistake.

Somehow David didn't seem to be scared of making a mistake. As our story concludes, we'll find out where he gets his fearlessness.

The Resolution

David tried his best to talk Achish into letting him fight, but it doesn't appear to have worked. Here's the king's response.

1 Samuel 30: 9-10:

And Achish answered David and said, "I know that you are as blameless in my sight as an angel of God. Nevertheless, the commanders of the Philistines have said, 'He shall not go up with us to the battle.' Now then rise early in the morning with the servants of your lord who came with you, and start early in the morning, and depart as soon as you have light."

The affection that Achish feels for David borders on comedy here. He calls him an "angel of God." Achish really doesn't want to hurt David's feelings, but he also doesn't want a problem with the Philistine commanders. He insists that David leave first thing in the morning so they can get on with the battle.

As readers we are relieved. We didn't want to see David face an impossible situation, so we're glad that Achish wasn't convinced by David's plea. This time David doesn't resist. He packs up and leaves in verse 11, "So David set out with his men early in the morning to return to the land of the Philistines. But the Philistines went up to Jezreel."

All throughout the story, the drama has been increasing. The armies were lined up for a big fight. The commanders didn't want David going with them. Achish tried to get him to leave. David insisted. The tension is building. But then David complies and leaves and the story is over.

It's kind of a letdown. The story just fizzles out. We were ready for some kind of big ethical quandary, but we get nothing. We're left scratching our heads. Did we miss something? Are we relieved or disappointed? What just happened?

What happened is that God intervened. God intervened. The narrator didn't say so explicitly, but we know that God is often the hidden character behind the scenes in the Old Testament. He isn't always called attention to. He's just there. In this case, God has saved David from the dangerous place that he had gotten himself into.

God is the invisible character behind the story. God has saved David from his undercover dilemma. God has saved David from himself.

The entire time we've been wondering about David. That has caused us to wonder about ourselves. Who are we really? Are we good guys who sometimes do bad things? Or are we really bad guys? What would we do in different situations? Would we really make the right decision if it comes down to it?

What would we do? Who are we really? Are we good guys or bad guys? Would we make the right decision in this case?

But when we get to the end of the story, it seems like we have been asking the wrong question. Maybe the question isn't really about us at all. Maybe the most important thing is not whether I'm a good guy or a bad guy.

Perhaps the question that should concern us has to do with God instead of us. Maybe the "Who is God?" question is more important than the "Who am I?" question.

David is a mystery in our story this morning. He defected to the Philistines in a moment of weakness. He leads a double life of lying to Achish. He gets himself into a really delicate situation. When he is given a way out, he almost makes it worse. We have no idea what David is doing. What is his plan?

But God is not a mystery. He steps in. The drama dissipates. The dilemma we've been worried about the whole time never even happens. It doesn't matter whether David makes the right choice because God does first.

Maybe this can help us. Maybe we need to spend less time trying to figure out who we are and more time simply knowing who God is. God is sovereign. His intention for his creation is good. He is restoring and redeeming through the ongoing work of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, the most important thing to know is that God is God. He is at work. His plans will come about. And God is good. He has the best in store for his creation. God is God and God is good.

Do you know what happens when you believe this? When you are convinced of God's goodness and sovereignty? When you know that God is at work and the question of his identity is more important than the question of your identity?

You become free. Jesus says it this way in John 8:36, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

We are free because of who God is and because sin has been dealt with by Jesus Christ on the cross. We are free to take action. We are free to move forward. We are free to enter into complicated situations with the confidence that God is with us.

Think about David living among the Philistines. They were idolaters. They were unjust. They were the enemies of God. He was pretending to be one of them. Every little decision he made was riddled with confusion. Nothing was clear.

Now think about your own life. Think about where you work or go to school or spend most of your time. Think about the news stories you read and the people you interact with. You might feel like you are undercover at times. Like you are living and working among people who have radically different values than you do.

When you think of yourself as undercover, it's easy to become afraid. That's what happens for a lot of us. We're scared of what is happening all around us. We are worried that the culture is going to overtake us. We don't understand and we are afraid. But fear is a terrible place to start.

When we are afraid we protect ourselves. We don't want to get hurt. Protection eventually becomes withdrawal. We pull back from people. We stop talking to the people who think differently from us. We carve out our own little world where things make sense to us. We don't want to make a mistake so we pull back and protect ourselves.

Fear leads to self-protection and self-doubt.

Freedom is completely different. Freedom means that we aren't afraid to get ourselves into complicated situations. It means that we engage the culture that we live in. It means that we listen to people that we disagree with. It means that we don't always have to have a clear escape plan because we know that God is the one with the plans.

When you know that God is God and God is good, then you have the freedom to make a decision. You have the freedom to risk making a mistake. You can get involved in the culture. Get involved.

What does that look like for you?

For me it meant inviting an acquaintance out to lunch. She is a rabbi in a same-sex marriage. I had known her for several years. We both worked with college students at Stanford and our children go to the same school. Ever since we (PBC) started talking in earnest about same-sex issues, I felt this sense that God wanted me to invite her to lunch. I wanted to listen to her. To hear her story and see what I could learn.

But I was afraid. Afraid that she'd judge me. Afraid that I would judge her. Afraid that the conversation would be awkward. Afraid that it wouldn't be awkward at all. So I ignored that little voice of God.

A few weeks ago I ran into her at my children's school. It seemed like God was pushing me to reach out. I was, after all, leading a conversation here at PBC on same-sex issues. So I did. I felt a little bit like David must have felt like. I didn't have a plan. I didn't know what the conversation might have been like.

In the end, it was great. I asked her whether a church that didn't affirm same sex sexual behavior could still love people in the LGBTQ community. She thought we could and had some thoughts for me to consider. I am so grateful for her patience and graciousness. I learned a lot from listening and asking questions. I'm excited for God to continue to use this new friendship.

What does it look like for you to get involved? Have that conversation. Investigate that theological topic. Volunteer. Confront your friend. Ask for forgiveness. Hang out with your colleagues after work. Meet your neighbor. Listen to news from a different perspective. Take action. See what happens.

I often see two ways that Christians are tempted to respond to our culture. One is that they sit back and criticize it from a distance. They listen to people they agree with. They lament the way the world is falling apart. They have opinions about everything. They make assumptions about what everyone else thinks and why.

Others are very involved in culture. Their lives are fully integrated with the world around them. But they manage to keep their Christian life and the cultural life pretty distinct. They avoid the topics that cause strife and tension. Talking about faith or values is way too dangerous. It might blow their cover. So they also make assumptions about what everyone else thinks and why.

This is not how we are called to live in the world around us. We can get involved. We can ask questions. We can listen to people who disagree. We don't have to be afraid. Of all people, if we know Jesus, then you don't have to be afraid of making mistakes. God is at work behind the scenes. He will protect us. He will lead us forward. We can get involved because we know that God is there.

When we're able to live like this, our lives get messy. We face lots of uncertain situations. We may doubt ourselves even more than we do now. But we don't have to doubt God. We know that God is in charge and His plans will come about.

Conclusion

We started off this morning by thinking about an undercover agent, worried about his identity. He was trying to figure out if being undercover had changed him. Or maybe he was wondering if he was a bad guy all along.

Then we talked about David, living among the Philistines, as he encountered a tricky situation. How would he act if he were asked to fight against His own people? He faced an undercover dilemma.

But maybe thinking about David as an undercover agent isn't the best analogy. We've seen that it isn't all that helpful for us. It makes us afraid and defensive.

Today is the first week of Advent. Today we start thinking about how God intervened in a confusing and messy culture over two thousand years ago. We remember the intervention of the incarnation. How Jesus came to earth as a human, getting involved in a surprising way.

This little baby was born to a people who had been waiting on deliverance for over 500 years. They were under Roman rule, but they knew that God had something better for them. There were a lot of different ideas about how to get there: fight the Romans, partner with them, ignore them, move into the wilderness, live holier lives, and the list went on. Everyone had an idea of how to make things better.

None of them involved a baby born to a poverty-stricken couple in a barn. But God intervened into that crazy world in a way that surprised everyone. It was his plan all along that was important.

Our world is pretty confusing too. Terrorist attacks across the world; threats against our own cities; vastly different views on policies toward refugees; racial chaos on our college campuses and within law enforcement; a growing financial divide; the tension of Silicon Valley's incredible prosperity and abject poverty; lives of incredible fulfillment and dark despair. Everything around us is ambiguous and murky and confusing.

But God is God and God is good. He intervenes. We can rest in his goodness and his plan. We can step into the confusion without fear. We can engage our culture without knowing exactly how things will turn out. We, too, can be incarnations in the world around us.

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of the world you live in. Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Engage the world that you live in. Take a risk. It's not all up to you. God is God and God is good.

Endnotes

¹Fast and Furious franchise. Universal Pictures. 2001-2015.

²Bazerman, Max H and Tenbrunsel, Ann E, Jackson. "Ethical Breakdowns." *Harvard Business Review* April. 2011.