

David: Games of Cat and Mouse. 1 Samuel 24 1-22

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The Jackie Robinson Story is the 1950 movie about the life, challenges, and achievements of baseball legend Jackie Robinson. With the help and vision of Brooklyn Dodgers general manager, Branch Rickey, he broke the professional baseball color barrier. Starring Jackie Robinson as himself, the movie depicts the prejudice and hatred Robinson had to endure and the depth of patience, courage, and self-control he displayed in the face of relentless adversity.

In one scene from the movie, at their first meeting, Rickey surprises Robinson by saying he wants Robinson to try out for his team and possibly become the first black player in the major leagues.

Rickey asks, *"What do you think, Jackie? Do you got guts enough to play the game no matter what happens? They'll shout insults at you. They'll come into you spikes first. They'll throw at your head."*

"They've been throwing at my head for a long time, Mr. Rickey," Robinson responds.

Rickey fabricates a scenario: *"Suppose I'm a player on the eve of an important game. Suppose I collide with you at second base, and when I get up, I say, 'You, you dirty black so-and-so.' What do you do?"*

"Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?" Robinson asks.

Rickey answers emphatically, *"I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back. You've got to do the job with base hits, stolen bases, and fielding ground balls, Jackie. Nothing else."*

"Now, I'm playing you in the World Series, and I'm hotheaded. I want to win the game. So, I go into you spikes first. You jab the ball in my ribs and the umpire says 'out.' All I can see is your black face, that black face right over me. So, I haul off and punch you right in the cheek. What do you do?"

Robinson calmly thinks for a moment, then answers, *"Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks."*

Happy with his answer, Rickey briefly discusses the contract with Robinson. As Robinson is about to leave, Rickey tells him, *"Remember one thing. No matter what happens on the ball field, you can't fight back. That's going to be the hard part. You can't fight back."*

Robinson does turn the other cheek and becomes a model of courage and humility on the ball field.

For some ten years of his life, God was training David to turn the other cheek, as he fled from place to place while Saul persistently sought to capture and kill him. As a youth, God had chosen David to be the next king over Israel, but it would take approximately twenty more years before he became king. Ironically for half of those years David lived in the palace with Saul while he spent the next half running from Saul.

We don't have time today to cover all of Saul's many attempts on David's life and the other evils he committed in the process, so for today we will focus on just one event illustrating God's continuing protection of David while also patiently training him to leave the revenge business to God; even when David was just one knife thrust away from getting even.

At the end of 1 Samuel chapter 23, after many years of playing cat and mouse with Saul, David and his ragtag outlaw army of some 300 men are currently hiding out in the caves of En Gedi on the west shore of the Dead Sea. It was an oasis in the desert with fresh water springs, waterfalls, lush vegetation, and countless caves in the limestone cliffs from which he could see his enemy coming from miles away; it was a perfect hideout for David.

Let's pick up the story in 1 Samuel chapter 24. Told that David is hiding in the wilderness of En-Gedi, Saul took three thousand chosen soldiers – the best of his best – and again went looking for David. Coming to a cave somewhere in that area, Saul went in "to relieve himself" not knowing that David and his men were also in the cave. (1-3).

With 3,000 of his soldiers standing around outside, Saul chose the one cave where David and his men were hiding, in which to take a nap. I don't think this was just a coincidence! One of the greatest tests of character comes at moments just like this, when our enemy is in a most vulnerable situation.

The men of David said to him, "Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'"

I can't find anywhere in the Old Testament where God actually said that to David; but doesn't it sound Biblical? His men were misquoting God to tempt David into being what each one of them would gladly have done.

Remember this is David's outlaw army made up of the outcasts of society. Their whole life had been spent stealing, fighting, and hiding; for them there was no such thing as "playing fair." They would gladly use any advantage to win, to get what they wanted, and here is their enemy in a very vulnerable position.

They said, "God is giving you this opportunity. Saul would immediately kill you if the situation were reversed, right?" The voice of revenge can be so strong; sometimes it even makes a lot of sense.

So what did David do? While Saul, fatigued by the heat of the day and blinded from the outside brightness, comes in to the cool darkness to get a brief rest, David quietly creeps forward, pulls out his knife ... and cuts off the corner of Saul's robe.

What happened after that?

Afterwards David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. He said to his men, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed.' So David scolded his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul. Then Saul got up and left the cave, and went on his way. (5-7).

I am sure David had not originally intended just to cut a corner from Saul's robe, but at this moment of final triumph, he still could not bring himself to harm God's anointed. He was even upset with himself for having cut off of piece of Saul's clothing.

Why this reaction from David? What he did seems so cleverly innocent compared to what he could have done, right? But we need to understand that even touching Saul's clothing was considered an act of contempt. It was an expression of utmost disrespect; kind of like if a modern Arab, today, throws his shoe at you.

David's heart was so sensitive to the things of God, that with all the things he could have done to Saul in that cave, even this necessary but insulting act bothered him.

After Saul and his men had gone a safe distance away, David came out of the cave, and called out to him, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed his face to the ground and did obeisance. Here is his mortal enemy standing just yards away and yet David begins by honoring Saul as king.

Showing him the corner of his robe, David said,

This day your own eyes can see that the LORD delivered you into my hand in the cave, and someone urged me to kill you. But I spared you, saying, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD'S anointed.' So now you know and can see that there is neither evil nor rebellion in my hand, and I have not sinned against you. Yet you hunt my life to take it. Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you.... (9-13).

Upon hearing and seeing David's proof of his peaceful intent and perhaps also realizing how close he had just come to his own death, Saul, moved with emotion, weeps while acknowledging that David was both innocent and honorable.

*Saul said, 'Is that your voice, my son David?' Saul then wept aloud. He said to David, 'You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. Today you have explained how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands. **For who has ever found an enemy, and sent the enemy safely away? So may the Lord reward you with good for what you have done to me this day.***

Saul went on to say, 'Now I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. Swear to me therefore by the Lord that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not wipe out my name from my father's house.' So David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home; but David and his men left for another stronghold. (16-21)

In Saul's rational moments, he knew the truth. He knew that David was not trying to take his throne, that David was righteous, and that David would be the next king. So Saul now asks David for a favor even though he doesn't deserve one.

In those days, when one rival king replaced another, the new king usually exterminated everyone in the old king's family to eliminate any future attempts against his newly acquired throne. So Saul pled with David for the life of his family, that in his new reign, they might be spared. David agreed and they both departed; Saul returning home and David to find his next hiding place.

Why doesn't David return with Saul?

He knew Saul only too well to trust him; his insane jealousy has only been momentarily quieted. True to his character, Saul will yet again send out another expedition to seek David's life and David will yet again in an act of righteous bravery – this time – steal Saul's spear and water jug from beside his head while he slept in the middle of his armed camp. But that is a story for another day.

So what can we take home from the story of David cutting the corner off Saul's robe? David had the perfect opportunity to take revenge upon Saul for the misery that he has and will continue putting David through, but David did not retaliate.

How can we, be like David?
Should we even want to be like David?
How can we leave revenge to the Lord?

Writing to the Roman Christians – even while they were undergoing a time of horrible persecution under the Emperor Nero, the Apostle Paul urged them

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

(Romans 12:17-21)

For years, commentators have argued over the meaning of Paul's expression of "**heaping burning coals on their heads.**" Some have argued that it's Paul's way of suggesting that you might at least get some sort of passive-aggressive revenge by publicly shaming them with your kindness. But I no longer believe this. I think Paul was using an old expression that has evolved through the years to now mean that you will make them "hot" or "red faced with shame;" which is exactly how Saul felt when David showed him the corner of his cloak.

How then can we learn to follow this Biblical guidance for leaving revenge in the hands of God?

Let me suggest that we can put this into practice by coming to grips with the following three truths.

Since we are all sinners ... expect that you are going to be mistreated

Truth #1. We should expect that we are going to be mistreated. We are all sinners. None of us will always do the right thing. Just as we have been sinned against, we also know that we have sinned against others.

And we also have to realize that there are some people who are not trying to do what is right. There are people who will intentionally try to harm us, for one reason or another.

Let me ask you this question! Have you been greatly harmed by someone in your life?

Has someone manipulated things to make himself or herself look good at your expense?

Has somebody promised you something and didn't come through?

Has someone you thought was a friend, turned out to be anything but a friend?

Has somebody failed you when you needed them the most?

Has your mom or dad, or some other relative left you with physical, verbal, or emotional scars?

Tragically many people are going to let us down and some of them are even going to intentionally inflict pain upon us! There are some people just that evil.

Consider what Putin is currently doing to the people of Ukraine, with his ground war stalled by their fierce resistance, he is now trying to bomb them into submission. What good is the country going to be for anyone after you have bombed all its cities into non-existence?

So we should not be surprised when evil is done to us, We should expect it, take it into account, and be as prepared as possible to give it the proper response.

Your greatest test
will be in how you treat people
who have mistreated you.
Unknown.

Truth #2. We should anticipate that we will want to have some sort of revenge.

When we have been hurt so deeply, we should expect that the temptation to retaliate will be very strong; whether we respond physically or just quietly call down curses upon their heads.

But that is a temptation that we must overcome. We must take our pain to the Lord. We must ask for Gods help to overcome the evil done to us so that we won't make the problem worse by retaliating.

Seeking revenge is the most ancient traditions of the fallen world. Known as *lex talionis*, "the law of the claw," it means that if you kill my goat, I will kill your cow. If you hurt my relative, I will kill your entire family, maybe even your entire village. Thus this ancient practice sets up a cycle of evil that has no end, only escalation.

Just think about the classic ongoing feuds... the Hatfields and McCoys, or the gangs in the big cities. Think about the Israelis and Palestinians who have been going after each other since the days of Ishmael and Isaac.

So when God through Moses established the Levitical law of *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*, this actually was an effort to move beyond the tradition of revenge by only dispensing justice equal to the crime and nothing more (24:17-22),. But Jesus said there

was an even better way to respond to the urge for revenge, which as Jackie Robinson knew from his church Sunday School days was to ***turn the other cheek.***

Because revenge has no more quenching effect on emotions than salt water has on thirst. **Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.** The desire for revenge only kills the person who holds on to it. So we should anticipate the desire for revenge and take those feelings to the Lord.

Truth #3. Which is perhaps the hardest for us fallen humans ... we must then leave the harm, the injustice done to us, in the hands of God.

Can we trust God to be the judge?
Can we leave room for God's wrath?
Can we trust God to justly balance the books in His own time?

Rather than take revenge, Jesus gave us the awesome challenge of loving our enemies by treating them in loving and righteous ways; if they are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them drink. That is how we overcome evil with good, by repaying evil with kindness. In doing that we can experience something far better than revenge! We can experience the peace of God. We will know that we are right with God and that God will bless us in the end.

The Apostle Peter learned this lesson well from Jesus. He would write,

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow ... when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.
1 Peter 2:21-23

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

We are now coming into Holy Week, where we will rehearse again how Jesus was insulted, beaten, abused, and then unjustly put to death in an inhumane fashion; all of which he quietly endured **knowing that by his stripes we were being healed** and trusting in God His Father to make all things right in the end. Which is exactly what God did on that day we now celebrate as Resurrection Day. That day, Christ rose again

from the dead and as we say in our statement of faith, he ascended into Heaven so that He might now be everywhere present in the lives of His believers.

The wonderful message of the gospel, is that because Jesus willingly went to the cross, without retaliating against the evil done to him, in Him our sins were punished, so we can now stand before God ... forgiven!

How can I not forgive anyone anything that they have done to me, when I realize how much of what I have done is what led to God's son being nailed to the cross. As we pray every Sunday, we must learn how to *forgive as we have been forgiven*.

That's something to pray about.