

Stripping Away

Chapter 18 of 1 Samuel marks a turning point in David's training to be king. Up until this point, God has placed him at court in Saul's inner circle not only through marriage to Saul's daughter, but also through his own military prowess. God is ready to move David on to the next phase of his training. To do so David is going to have everything familiar torn away from him and he will undergo a time of intense trial and suffering.

God will systematically remove 5 things from David's life that have taught him the skills he needed, but now are becoming crutches. David will learn to stand on his own, seeking support and guidance from God alone.

David entered into Saul's court becoming Saul's musician and armor bearer (body guard and servant). David was privy to the conversations and activities in the inner circle of Saul's court. David eventually rose among the ranks of Saul's army to become one of Saul's best generals. David learned to lead an army and saw how to run a kingdom first hand. His skill and position led to personal ties with the king's family. He benefited greatly from a good position at Saul's court. He had proven himself dependable, faithful and effective. (1 Samuel 18:5, 14-16) Unfortunately his presence at court was cut short by Saul's insane jealousy. David is effectively exiled from the court when Saul tries to kill him a second time. He will never again serve in Saul's army. He loses friends, comrades-in-arms and colleagues when he is forced to leave the court. He can rely on no one from the court for favors or support. He is stripped of a good position.

David, fleeing from court goes home to his wife. She tells he must keep running, that Saul's men will surely come for him at their home by morning. The Bible says Michal loved him. (1 Samuel 18:28) She and their home must have been a safe haven, but no longer. David is forced to make his escape during the night. He must flee from his own home and wife. David loses the support and comfort of his home and wife.

Next David goes to Samuel in Ramah. Samuel had been the one to anoint David. He was a wise man, a wise counselor. Surely if anyone could help David in this situation it was Samuel. Samuel took David to Naioth where David briefly found sanctuary and protection from the Spirit of God as the Spirit over powered Saul and his men. But this was a temporary fix. In escaping Saul at Naioth, David loses the aid of a trusted and valuable counselor. Samuel is not in a position to render support to David at this time.

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While Saul was delayed and under the influence of the Spirit of God, again David and flees to Jonathan. Next he will have to leave his closest friend and ally. As we saw in the intense exchange between Jonathan and David (in Chapter 20), David is becoming more emotionally frustrated. He is rapidly losing places to turn. Jonathan can provide no support or protection from the King.

Lastly, David flees Israel altogether seeking shelter from Israel's enemy, the Philistines. David turns to the city of Gath where he is surely to be recognized, and he is. Of course the Philistine's would know he was the man who killed their giant warrior. David's reason for going there: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Essentially he is considering turning traitor. It was not uncommon in those days for a high ranking member of a King's army or counsel to have a dispute that ends with him being exiled and seeking a place in the enemy ranks. But God even closes that door. The Philistine's fear him more than they trust him. 1 Samuel 21: 12-13 says: *"David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. So he pretended to be insane..."*

I have a feeling it wasn't such a stretch for David to "pretend" to be insane. After having so much stripped away from him in a relatively short period of time, I think it would be somewhat natural to lose a sense self as well. In playing the madman David was rolling in the dirt, clawing at the gate and foaming at the mouth. He resorts to feigned insanity as the only way to protect himself from the Philistines. The one who was hailed as a hero, great general and son-in-law of the king of Israel was rolling in the dirt like a madman. I think he is being stripped of any little bit of pride and pretension that may have come with all the accolades at court. David is now playing the role of the lowest of the low in society – the insane. He must throw aside his self-respect in exchange for the protection of "madness". In the minds of the Philistines David is no longer a threat. He is left unharmed because the culture of the time believed they would incur the wrath of the gods for harming the insane. I think some of David's acting is bordering on a real breakdown. He doesn't know what to do, where to go, and Saul is hot on his tail to kill him. He's probably wondering about that anointing he received and what that was all supposed to mean. Just like a madman, he has nowhere else to turn or to go but the wilderness beyond the borders of Judea and Philistine. As we will see in Chapter 22, David finds temporary refuge in a cave in Adullam, in the wilderness.

Each of the five things that David leaned on served their purpose for a time. They were opportunities for learning the skills required for his future kingship. His wife and Jonathan were an emotional support system and refuge in a very intense and stressful life-style. Think what the pressures must be like in any court or political arena. That is where

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David was not only living and learning, but also thriving. He had done exceptionally well. Now the time has come where God removes each one of these crutches in an effort to teach David dependence on God – not on position, people, or self.

The problem with crutches is they become substitutes for God. Things and people are tangible in this world. They are ready at hand and give us the feeling of reassurance that we are seeking. The problem is they become a substitute for God's support and reassurance. God says he will hold us up. How can he do that if we choose to lean on to lean on things other than God?

Crutches keep our focus horizontal. When we lean on other people or other things we are keeping our focus on things of this plane, of this world. We are not looking upward seeking the aid of our Father. When we trust in things of this world, not only will they eventually fail us, but they very effectively paralyze and impede the growth of our faith.

Crutches are temporary. The things of this world are temporary. The place they occupy in our lives are temporary. If they are people, they move on. If they are things, they are effective only for so long.

God doesn't give temporary relief, he offers a permanent solution. Deuteronomy 33:27 says God is our strength and our refuge:

*The eternal God is your refuge,
and underneath are the everlasting arms.
He will drive out your enemy before you,
saying, 'Destroy him!'*

Isaiah 41:10 says it is God who will hold you up and help you:

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

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David is entering a season of intense trial and suffering. Let's look at a New Testament parallel. Compare this to Paul's description of his own suffering in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33:

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

The trials and suffering we face for the sake of Christ – living and sharing his Gospel in order to bring others into a closer relationship with him build up our character – demonstrate our faith and prepare us for further service to the Lord.

It appears that the Lord has used this same program of stripping away crutches to draw his beloved servants closer to him and make them more effective in their service. He did it to David, he did it to Paul, and I'm sure as you reflect back on your life you can see where he has done it to you. It is a painful process and one that hopefully we learn the first time around and don't have to repeat! I know there have been people and things in my life that God has painfully pruned away. It was an excruciating process, often taking me in a direction I didn't want to go and thought was contrary to where I ought to be going. But the result has always brought me closer to the Lord and into avenues of service I never expected!

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Psalm 59 was written by David and traditionally thought to have been composed at about this point in his life. The first verse shows us that the process of stripping away his crutches has had its desired effect: "*Deliver me from my enemies, O God;*" --He calls upon God, not anyone else. In verse 4, David calls upon the Lord because he is innocent of wrong doing. He says, "*I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me. Arise to help me; look on my plight!*" David is not and cannot rely on his own strength for deliverance. But he knows he can rely on the Lord's strength.

In verses 7-13 David describes how the evil people live as if God cannot see and will not punish their iniquity. But, God watches patiently until that day when their deeds rise up to accuse them:

*See what they spew from their mouths--
they spew out swords from their lips,
and they say, "Who can hear us?"*
8 *But you, O LORD, laugh at them;
you scoff at all those nations.*

9 *O my Strength, I watch for you;
you, O God, are my fortress, **10** my loving God.
God will go before me
and will let me gloat over those who slander me.*
11 *But do not kill them, O Lord our shield,
or my people will forget.
In your might make them wander about,
and bring them down.*
12 *For the sins of their mouths,
for the words of their lips,
let them be caught in their pride.
For the curses and lies they utter,
13 consume them in wrath,
consume them till they are no more.
Then it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob.*

Finally in verses 16-17, David sings praise to Lord for His strength, and His deliverance:

*But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of your love;*

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*for you are my fortress,
my refuge in times of trouble.*

*17 O my Strength, I sing praise to you;
you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God.*

David's psalm ends in gratitude for the God upon whose strength, mercy and love he can rely. Much like when he was a young man tending his flock and fighting off the bears and lions prowling about his lambs. No man or position can support him, only faith in the Lord will not fail him.