

1 Samuel Chapter 23

Verses 1-6: “Abiathar” the priest had brought the “ephod” with him when he fled from Nob. This is important because the sacred lots (stones), kept within this linen pouch were the means by which David “inquired of the Lord.”

David could see that the people of “Keilah” needed help, but he did not attempt to come to their aid until he had confirmed the Lord’s will through the sacred Urim and Thummim (see note on 23:1-6). In nearly every pursuit, this would be David’s practice: ask God before you act.

1 Samuel 23:1 "Then they told David, saying, Behold, the Philistines fight against Keilah, and they rob the threshing floors."

Either the men of Keilah sent to him, being near them, or some well-wishers of theirs, and of their country, acquainted him with their case.

"Saying, behold, the Philistines fight against Keilah": Had laid siege to it, being a fortified place (1 Sam. 23:7); it was a city in the tribe of Judah, on the borders of the Philistines (see Joshua 15:44).

"And they rob the threshing floors": Took away the corn upon them, which they were threshing and winnowing, which were usually done throughout the city for the sake of wind (see Judges 6:11). It was harvest time when the three mighty men came to David in the cave of Adullam, and so now it might be the time of threshing, harvest being over (see 1 Sam. 22:1; compared with 2 Sam. 23:13).

“Keilah”: A city located in the western foothills of Judah (see Joshua 15:44), about 18 miles southwest of Jerusalem and 3 miles southeast of Adullam.

This is a break from the troubles with Saul. Possibly, Saul had been neglecting his borders with the Philistines and they have come against Keilah. These Philistine raiders thought they would take advantage of the situation with David and Saul. They felt they could make an attack against Keilah (not far from their border), and rob the threshing floors.

1 Samuel 23:2 "Therefore David inquired of the LORD, saying, Shall I go and smite these Philistines? And the LORD said unto David, Go, and smite the Philistines, and save Keilah."

“Inquired of the Lord”: Such inquiries were made using the sacred lots, the Urim and Thummim, stored in the priestly ephod which Abiathar had brought to David (verse 6; see note on Exodus 28:30).

David asks the will of God before he takes this task in hand. The most important thing to David was remaining in the will of the Lord. He thought of his wishes in subjection to the LORD. The answer from the LORD is go.

1 Samuel 23:3 "And David's men said unto him, Behold, we be afraid here in Judah: how much more then if we come to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?"

Of Saul and his army falling upon them, and crushing them, though they were in the tribe of Judah, where they had many friends, and in the heart of that tribe.

"How much more then if we come to Keilah": Which, though in the same tribe, yet in the further parts of it, and on the borders of the Philistines.

"Against the armies of the Philistines?" Too numerous and powerful for them, and so by this means be driven out of their place of safety, the forest of Hareth, where they could hide themselves upon occasion. To be exposed not only to the Philistines that were before them, on the edge of their country, from whence they could have re-enforcements easily, but to Saul and his army behind them. And so, being between two fires, would be in danger of being cut off.

David's men feel that this will leave them open to attack from the Philistines on one side and Saul on the other. If they are having to hide from Saul, why should they open up another front to fight? They have forgotten that the LORD is with them.

1 Samuel 23:4 "Then David inquired of the LORD yet again. And the LORD answered him and said, Arise, go down to Keilah: for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand."

This second enquiry, made for the sake of inspiring his little army with confidence before embarking on the seemingly desperate attempt, was, as in the previous case mentioned (in 1 Sam. 23:2), no doubt through the prophet Gad. Abiathar had not yet arrived with the ephod.

"For I will deliver the Philistines into thine hands": Which is still more explicit, and is a promise not only of delivering Keilah out of the hands of the Philistines, but of delivering them into David's hands. And so, a guarantee of a victory; therefore none of David's men had anything to fear after such a declaration of the will of God.

David asks the LORD the second time to be sure. He wants his men to believe they can win also. This time, the answer from the LORD is more emphatic. He still tells them to go, but now promises them that they will win. The LORD will deliver the Philistines into their hands.

1 Samuel 23:5 "So David and his men went to Keilah, and fought with the Philistines, and brought away their cattle, and smote them with a great slaughter. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah."

Encouraged by a commission from God and a promise of success by him.

"And fought with the Philistines": That were encamped before Keilah.

"And brought away their cattle": Which they had brought with them for the support of their army; or having routed them, they pursued them into their own country, and brought away their cattle from there.

"And smote them with a great slaughter": Killed great numbers of them, and put the rest to flight.

"So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah": From falling into the hands of the Philistines, by timely raising the siege of the city.

Keilah was near where they were encamped. David and the men went to fight for Keilah and won. They killed the invaders and took their cattle. These Philistines had been cattle, sheep, and goat rustlers, as well as taking the grain. David retrieved it all and some extra as well. David and his men, with the help of the LORD, saved Keilah. All the people of Keilah would be supporters of David now.

1 Samuel 23:6 "And it came to pass, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David to Keilah, [that] he came down [with] an ephod in his hand."

The "ephod" contained the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:6-30), by which the divine will could be sought (verses 9-12; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; see the note at 2:18).

Abiathar fled to David with the ephod in his hand. David knows that God will speak to him through the ephod. Abiathar was respected by David.

Verses 7-14: Saul was so intent on capturing David that he was willing to risk his soldiers' lives and besiege his own people. Saul's superior military power was no match for God's hedge of protection around David.

1 Samuel 23:7 "And it was told Saul that David was come to Keilah. And Saul said, God hath delivered him into mine hand; for he is shut in, by entering into a town that hath gates and bars."

"Gates and bars": Literally "two doors and a bar". Keilah perhaps had only one gateway in its wall. Its two reinforced wooden doors had hinged posts at the sides of the entrance, meeting in the center and secured with a heavy bar spanning the entrance horizontally. Since there was only this one way in and out of the city, Saul believed he had David trapped.

How could Saul be deceived into believing that God would be with him? He has just killed 85 of the priests (chosen men of God). He is fooled into believing that David is trapped in Keilah. The town had gates and bars which could keep people out, but could also keep others in.

1 Samuel 23:8 "And Saul called all the people together to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men."

Or "caused them to hear" summoned them by a crier, whom he sent into all parts of the kingdom to proclaim war, and require them in his name to attend him; which was the prerogative of a king to do.

"To go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men": That was what he privately intended, but the pretense was to make war against the Philistines.

The battle against the Philistines is over. Saul calls his men to go with him to destroy David. If he can catch them inside the walled city, it would be just a matter of time until David would be destroyed.

1 Samuel 23:9 "And David knew that Saul secretly practiced mischief against him; and he said to Abiathar the priest, Bring hither the ephod."

That is, planned and contrived it, and formed schemes in order to do him mischief, giving out one thing, and designing another. So he pretended war against the Philistines, but his intention was to come against Keilah and take David there.

"And he said to Abiathar the priest, bring hither the ephod": Not for David to put on, but for the priest himself, that being clothed with it, and the Urim and Thummim in it, he might inquire for him of the Lord.

David has received word of Saul's evil intent. Notice again, David consults with God before doing anything. Abiathar brings the ephod so God can give David his answers.

1 Samuel 23:10 "Then said David, O LORD God of Israel, thy servant hath certainly heard that Saul seeketh to come to Keilah, to destroy the city for my sake."

By the priest, for it was he that put the questions for and in the name of the inquirer.

"O Lord God of Israel": The great Jehovah, the covenant God of his people, who always has a merciful regard unto them.

"Thy servant hath certainly heard": Had good information of it, on which he could depend.

"That Saul seeketh to come to Keilah": That was his intention and resolution.

"To destroy the city for my sake": To besiege it, and demolish it, if that was necessary, in order to take him.

1 Samuel 23:11 "Will the men of Keilah deliver me up into his hand? will Saul come down, as thy servant hath heard? O LORD God of Israel, I beseech thee, tell thy servant. And the LORD said, He will come down."

"Deliver me": David inquired of the Lord again, using the ephod with the Urim and Thummim by which God revealed His will. David wanted to know whether the men of Keilah would be disloyal and surrender him into the hands of Saul. The Lord answered in the affirmative (in verse 12).

David is praying to God for directions of what he should do from this point on. Perhaps, David had planned to stay in the city after the victory. Now his plans may have to be changed. David presents the problem to the LORD God and waits for an answer through the ephod from God. He is not sure just what would take place, if the giant army of Saul comes against this city. The LORD answers him and says "He will come down".

1 Samuel 23:12 "Then said David, Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the LORD said, They will deliver [thee] up."

That is, the lords and great men of the place, the governor of the city, and the heads of it, and the chief magistrates in it.

"And the Lord said, they will deliver thee up": That is provided he stayed there. For the Lord knew the dispositions and affections of their minds and what they were inclined to do it, and would do it, if he continues among them till Saul came down. This showed the great ingratitude of this people to their deliverer.

Again, David asks the LORD and the LORD speaks through the ephod. The men of Keilah will be afraid and turn David over to Saul.

1 Samuel 23:13 "Then David and his men, [which were] about six hundred, arose and departed out of Keilah, and went whithersoever they could go. And it was told Saul that David was escaped from Keilah; and he forbore to go forth."

"Men ... about six hundred" (see note on 22:2), when David had only 400 men.

David did not wait. When he had the word from the LORD, he immediately left with his men. Notice, David's men had grown to 600. They hid wherever they could. Saul did not bother to come to Keilah after he heard David had left. It was David he wanted to kill any way he could.

1 Samuel 23:14 "And David abode in the wilderness in strong holds, and remained in a mountain in the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God delivered him not into his hand."

"Wilderness ... strong holds": The wilderness of Judah is the barren desert area between the hill country and the Dead Sea. Many ravines and caves are found in this rugged region which David used as a place of refuge from Saul. The title of Psalm 63 may refer to this incident (or to 2 Sam. 15:23-28).

"Wilderness of Ziph": The wilderness surrounding Ziph, 4 miles south of Hebron.

"God delivered him not": God sovereignly protected David from Saul for the fulfilling of His own divine purposes (Isa. 46:9-11).

David inquired of the LORD when he moved, and God protected David. Saul had nothing on his mind, but capturing and killing David. David hid in the wilderness and in the mountains, moving often.

1 Samuel 23:15 "And David saw that Saul was come out to seek his life: and David [was] in the wilderness of Ziph in a wood."

Either he saw him with his bodily eyes from the top of the mountain where he was (1 Sam. 23:14); or he perceived it. He understood by information given him by his friends, it may have been by Jonathan, or by spies he sent to observe his motions.

"And David was in the wilderness of Ziph in a wood": Where he and his men could hide themselves among the trees in it. Sometimes he was in a mountain in this wilderness, and sometimes in a wood, where he thought himself the safest; thus was this great man obliged to shift about for his safety.

Ziph was south of Hebron near the desert. This wilderness gave them a hiding place from Saul.

Verses 16-18: In a time of discouragement for David, Jonathan visited his friend at great personal risk and "strengthened his hand in God". This was not casual encouragement; Jonathan spoke to his beloved friend in ways that would root God's courage and comfort in his heart. Again "Jonathan" and "David" renewed their "covenant" with one another and before "God". There is no record that they ever met again before Jonathan was killed in battle (31:2).

Verses 16-17: "Strengthened his hand in God": Jonathan encouraged David by reminding him of the Lord's promise to him and concern for him, by emphatically assuring him that the Lord would make him the next king over Israel, as Saul well knew (see 20:30-31).

1 Samuel 23:16 "And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God."

"Where David had appointed to meet him at that time, and strengthened his hand in God": He comforted and supported him against all his fears, by minding him of God's infallible promises made to him, and his singular providence which hitherto had and still would be with him.

Jonathan and Saul were not on very good terms. Saul did not however, keep up with Jonathan's moves. Somehow Jonathan knew where David was and went to him. Jonathan encouraged David. Perhaps he also told him that many people believed David was the rightful king.

1 Samuel 23:17 "And he said unto him, Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth."

Or, hold the second place in the kingdom; which words import thus much. I do not look to be king myself, as by my birth I might expect, but that thou shalt be king; God having so appointed, and I but in a secondary place, inferior to thee. The first part of this sentence Jonathan might well speak, as he had the promise of God for it, which must stand. But the other he spoke in human confidence, and the event showed how little is to be built on that.

He ought, as we ought all to do with respect to what is future and only in expectation, to have spoken in the language of James: "If the Lord will, I shall be next unto thee."

"And that also my father knoweth": For he could not but remember what Samuel told him, (1 Samuel 15:28), and from David's wonderful successes, he probably inferred that he was the person of whom Samuel spake.

This was good news for David. His friend has given him the courage he needs to fight on. Jonathan is aware the reason Saul wants to kill David, is because he knows David will replace him as king.

1 Samuel 23:18 "And they two made a covenant before the LORD: and David abode in the wood, and Jonathan went to his house."

Renewed the covenant they had before made in the name and fear of God, and before him as a witness of it. Kimchi and Abarbinel interpret this phrase "before the Lord", of the covenant being made before Abiathar, with the Urim and Thummim in his hand. And so Jerom, before Gad the prophet, and Abiathar who wore the ephod.

"And David abode in the wood": Being a proper place for him for secrecy and safety.

"And Jonathan went to his house": In Gibeah; and these two dear and cordial friends never saw one another again, as is highly probable.

"Covenant" (see notes on 18:3; 20:8).

This covenant is an agreement that the things Jonathan said (in verse 17 above), will happen. They will both live up to their agreement. Jonathan does not go back to the camp of his father, but goes home. David remains hidden in the woods.

1 Samuel 23:19 "Then came up the Ziphites to Saul to Gibeah, saying, Doth not David hide himself with us in strong holds in the wood, in the hill of Hachilah, which [is] on the south of Jeshimon?"

"Hill of Hachilah": Location unknown, somewhere between Ziph and the Dead Sea (see the title of Psalm 54).

"Jeshimon": Another name for the wilderness of Judea.

Ziph was in the highland area very close to where David was hiding. This just means that some of these people went and told Saul where David was hiding.

1 Samuel 23:20 "Now therefore, O king, come down according to all the desire of thy soul to come down; and our part [shall be] to deliver him into the king's hand."

From Gibeah to Ziph and the wilderness of it, where David was.

"According to all the desires of thy soul to come down": To seize such a prey which he was greatly desirous of, and of nothing more so than of that according to Abarbinel. The sense is, that the thing was ready in whatever way he should desire it; if he chose to come down himself, and lay hold on him, they invite him to come down. But if he did not choose to come down himself, they would seize him, and bring him to him, then deliver him up into his hand, and so he would be under no necessity of going down after him.

"And our part shall be to deliver him into the king's hand": This we will take upon us to do, and save the king the trouble of coming down.

These people will fight on the side of Saul. They are promising to help Saul. The main thing they have forgotten is that God is on the side of David.

1 Samuel 23:21 "And Saul said, Blessed [be] ye of the LORD; for ye have compassion on me."

He highly commends them for the offer they made to him, blesses God for them, and desires the blessing of God upon them for it.

"For ye have compassion on me": Pitied him on account of the troubles he met with from his son-in-law. Were sorry for him, and sympathized with him, which others did not, of which he complained (1 Sam. 22:8).

Saul knows that he is fast losing his power over the people. Many have seen the cruelty of his reign. Those who are in his army realize that Saul has lost his mind. To have Saul speak a blessing of God upon you would mean nothing. Saul is not God's man.

1 Samuel 23:22 "Go, I pray you, prepare yet, and know and see his place where his haunt is, [and] who hath seen him there: for it is told me [that] he dealeth very subtly."

That is, go home, return to their habitations, and get things in a greater readiness for him; inquire more diligently after David, get more intelligence of him, and inform themselves more about him.

"And know and see his place where his haunt is": Or where his "foot or feet" are, where he steps and walks most frequently, not only get knowledge of it by information, but if they could get sight of it with their own eyes, that they might describe it more exactly.

"And who hath seen him there": Not only seen the place, but him in the place, and that often, that it may be certain it is the place he usually resorts to.

"For it is told me that he dealeth very subtilly": Sometimes he is seen in one place, and sometimes in another; he is here today and elsewhere tomorrow. And by such crafty methods it is not easy to know where the place is, and where he is to be found. This Saul had information of from some, who knew the methods David took to keep it unknown where it was; or "it says to me"; my heart says so to me.

Saul is aware that David is very careful. He knows that David will move his location if he finds that Saul knows where he is. Saul does not want to go out and not find David. That would be another embarrassment for him.

1 Samuel 23:23 "See therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking places where he hideth himself, and come ye again to me with the certainty, and I will go with you: and it shall come to pass, if he be in the land, that I will search him out throughout all the thousands of Judah."

Which he most frequents, that ye may be able to describe them, and the way to them, and easily find them when necessary.

"And come ye again to me with the certainty": Of time and place, when and where he may be certainly found.

"And I will go with you": Upon such certain intelligence: it is evident that he did not seize this opportunity, and go directly with them. For by this delay, David being informed of the Ziphites coming to Saul to betray him, had time to depart elsewhere.

"And it shall come to pass, if he be in the land": In the land of Israel, or rather in the land that is in the tribe of Judah.

"That I will search him out throughout all the thousands of Judah; through all the divisions of that tribe, which, as others, were divided into thousands (see Micah 5:2).

If they can come with certainty to Saul and tell him where David is, he will take a large portion of his army and seek him out. Even through all of Judah. Saul does not want to look foolish hunting for David in an area where he has already left.

1 Samuel 23:24 "And they arose, and went to Ziph before Saul: but David and his men [were] in the wilderness of Maon, in the plain on the south of Jeshimon."

"Wilderness of Maon": The barren territory in the vicinity of Maon (see Joshua 15:48, 55), about 5 miles south of Ziph.

It seems that somehow, David found out they were going to Saul to report where he was. While they were gone, he moved to the wilderness of Maon, which is about 6 miles away from where they had been. This location was between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

1 Samuel 23:25 "Saul also and his men went to seek [him]. And they told David: wherefore he came down into a rock, and abode in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard [that], he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon."

“A rock”: A landmark in the wilderness of Maon, soon to be given a name (verse 28).

Saul went to search David out knowing the vicinity of where he was. It seemed that someone got word to Saul that David was in the wilderness of Maon, and Saul went immediately there.

1 Samuel 23:26 "And Saul went on this side of the mountain, and David and his men on that side of the mountain: and David made haste to get away for fear of Saul; for Saul and his men compassed David and his men round about to take them."

Saul with his army came to the very mountain where David and his men were, the one was on one side of it, and the other on the other side; there was only one mountain between them.

"And David made haste to get away for fear of Saul": He fled on one side of the mountain, while Saul was pursuing him on the other, and hastening to get round unto him.

"For Saul and his men compassed David and his men round about to take them": He took methods by dividing his troops, and sending them different ways, to surround David and his men, and had very near affected it.

Saul had so many more men than David that Saul could separate his forces and close in on David. It appears they were so close they could see the other troops. There seemed to be a gorge which protected David and his troops somewhat. It was frightening, however, to see the large army of Saul so close.

1 Samuel 23:27 "But there came a messenger unto Saul, saying, Haste thee, and come; for the Philistines have invaded the land."

From his court, by order of his council there; though the Jews say it was an angel from heaven; but be it which it will, it was certainly the providence of God that directed this affair. That a messenger should come to Saul just at that very time that David was likely to fall into his hands.

"Saying, haste thee, and come, for the Philistines have invaded the land": Were come into it, and had spread themselves in it, as the word signifies. Which express the numbers they had as they poured in. The force they came with, and the possessions they had already taken. Perhaps they had taken the advantage of Saul's departure in quest of David, to penetrate into the tribe of Benjamin, where his patrimony, residence, and court were. And which were liable to fall into their hands; and therefore his presence was immediately required, and haste was necessary.

The LORD has delivered David out of the hands of Saul, again. The Philistine invasion took the place of importance for the moment. Saul will have to leave this battle, to keep his land from being taken by the Philistines.

1 Samuel 23:28 "Wherefore Saul returned from pursuing after David, and went against the Philistines: therefore they called that place Sela-hammahlekoth."

Stopped short at once, or as soon as he had received the message.

"And went against the Philistines": To stop them in their progress, and drive them out of his country.

"Sela-hammahlekoth": The timely retreat of Saul's men from David's men led to this name.

Saul calls his troops to the battle against the Philistines. David is safe for the time being. "Sela-hammahlekoth" means the cliff of divisions.

1 Samuel 23:29 "And David went up from thence, and dwelt in strong holds at En-ge-di."

"David fled to En-ge-di", a place known for its freshwater springs. The area surrounding En-ge-di, rocky slopes dotted with caves, was fit only for animals; but it was a welcome place for a fugitive to easily hide.

"En-ge-di" bears the name of a perennial spring that gushes from a small promontory about six hundred feet above the Dead Sea. The remarkable water supply in the midst of such a desolate region led to the creation of a small community at the site. En-ge-di was on the barren western shore of the Dead Sea about 35 miles southeast of Jerusalem, 18 miles southeast of Hebron, and part of the allotment of Judah (Joshua 15:62). Because En-ge-di lay on the eastern edge of the rugged wilderness of Judah, David hid himself in this area when he was fleeing from King Saul (23:29-24:1). It was watered by a hot spring that came forth about three or four hundred feet above the base of a large cliff and yielded an abundance of fresh water that created an oasis rich in semitropical vegetation and vineyards (SOS 1:14). En-ge-di is a modern-day tourist attraction.

This area stood in stark contrast to the surrounding wilderness. The limestone that dominates this region is permeated with caves, which provided good hiding places for David.

"En-ge-di" means fountain of the wild goats. This tells us there is water and food here. This place is full of caves. This would be an ideal place for David and his men.

1 Samuel Chapter 23 Questions

1. Who have the Philistines attacked in verse 1?
2. What are they robbing?

3. What did David do, before he made up his mind to attack the Philistines?
4. What did the LORD tell David to do?
5. What did David's men say to David about going?
6. What did David do, before he decided for himself and the men?
7. What did God add to His response this time?
8. Who will deliver the Philistines into their hands?
9. What did David do, besides win the battle with the Philistines?
10. What animals had the Philistines rustled?
11. Who fled to David, with an ephod in his hand?
12. God will speak to David through the _____.
13. Why did Saul believe the LORD had delivered David into his hands?
14. What would happen, if the large army of Saul trapped David in the city walls?
15. What did David do, when he heard Saul was coming to trap him?
16. What did David ask of God?
17. What was God's answer to David?
18. Why would the men of Keilah turn David over to Saul?
19. David's men have grown to _____.
20. Where did David go from Keilah?
21. How often did Saul seek to kill David?
22. Who came to meet with David and re-assure him?
23. What did he tell David in the way of encouragement?
24. What was the covenant they made in the woods?
25. Who told Saul, where David was camped?
26. To have Saul speak a blessing from God on them meant _____.
27. Where had David and his men gone from Ziph?

28. When David heard that Saul was coming, where did he go with his men?
29. How close did Saul come to taking David?
30. What news came to Saul that caused him to leave David alone?
31. What does "Sela-hammahlekoth" mean?
32. Where did David go next?
33. What does "En-ge-di" mean?