FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 23

*David Saves Keilah*

**When David was told, “Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are looting the threshing floors,” 2 he inquired of the Lord, saying, “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?” The Lord answered him, “Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah.” 3 But David’s men said to him, “Here in Judah we are afraid. How much more, then, if we go to Keilah against the Philistine forces!” 4 Once again David inquired of the Lord, and the Lord answered him, “Go down to Keilah, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand.” 5 So David and his men went to Keilah, fought the Philistines and carried off their livestock. He inflicted heavy losses on the Philistines and saved the people of Keilah. 6 (Now Abiathar son of Ahimelech had brought the ephod down with him when he fled to David at Keilah.)**

**23:1** *they*. No specific persons; likely Judeans. (TLSB)

*Keilah*. Judean town close to the Philistine border; a vulnerable target for raids. (TLSB)

**23:2** *he inquired of the Lord*. By means of the Urim and Thummim through the high priest Abiathar (see vv. 6, 9 and note on 2:28). (CSB)

We are not told whether the inquiry was made through Abiathar the priest. In v 10, David inquires directly in prayer, as Hannah prayed without mediation (ch 1). (TLSB)

*save Keilah*. Echoes the role of Israel’s judges, who saved Israel from their attackers (e.g., Jgs 2:16). (TLSB)

**23:3** David’s men feared that involvement against the Philistines would set them against a yet more fearsome adversary than Saul. (TLSB)

**23:4** Military inferiority was irrelevant. (TLSB)

**23:5** *brought away their livestock*. Perhaps already plundered from the people of Keilah, or beasts brought along to carry back the spoil. (TLSB)

*Saul Pursues David*

**7 Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah, and he said, “God has handed him over to me, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars.” 8 And Saul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men. 9 When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod.” 10 David said, “O Lord, God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. 11 Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant.” And the Lord said, “He will.” 12 Again David asked, “Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?” And the Lord said, “They will.” 13 So David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there. 14 David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands. 15 While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. 16 And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. 17 “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.” 18 The two of them made a covenant before the Lord. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh. 19 The Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah and said, “Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hakilah, south of Jeshimon? 20 Now, O king, come down whenever it pleases you to do so, and we will be responsible for handing him over to the king.” 21 Saul replied, “The Lord bless you for your concern for me. 22 Go and make further preparation. Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty. 23 Find out about all the hiding places he uses and come back to me with definite information. Then I will go with you; if he is in the area, I will track him down among all the clans of Judah.” 24 So they set out and went to Ziph ahead of Saul. Now David and his men were in the Desert of Maon, in the Arabah south of Jeshimon. 25 Saul and his men began the search, and when David was told about it, he went down to the rock and stayed in the Desert of Maon. When Saul heard this, he went into the Desert of Maon in pursuit of David. 26 Saul was going along one side of the mountain, and David and his men were on the other side, hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his forces were closing in on David and his men to capture them, 27 a messenger came to Saul, saying, “Come quickly! The Philistines are raiding the land.” 28 Then Saul broke off his pursuit of David and went to meet the Philistines. That is why they call this place Sela Hammahlekoth. 29 And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi.**

**23:7** *God*. Unlike David, Saul does not use the distinctive name “the Lord,” by which the Almighty revealed Himself (Ex 3:14–15). Saul attributes his fortune to divine intervention, but he makes the same mistake as David’s comrades in v 3, merely looking at the outward circumstances and ignoring God’s will. (TLSB)

**23:8** Still following faulty reasoning (v 7), Saul musters all his troops to exploit his advantage. (TLSB)

*besiege*. Labor-intensive tactic. (TLSB)

**23:9** *Bring the ephod.* See note on v. 2. (CSB)

**23:10–13** Inquiry is made by way of yes-or-no questions, as with the other priestly device, the sacred Urim and Thummim. (TLSB)

**23:11** *Will Saul come down*. David’s first question is to confirm the report he has heard. (TLSB)

*the Lord* *said*. Mediated by Abiathar. (TLSB)

**23:12** *Will the men of Keilah surrender me*. Urgent question, in light of the Lord’s confirmation of Saul’s attack. The Lord affirms their betrayal, even though David has saved them, and Saul seeks to destroy the city on account of David. (TLSB)

**23:13** *about six hundred.* The number of David’s men has grown significantly (cf. 22:2). (CSB)

In 22:2, his company amounted to 400 men. This has been supplemented, perhaps by a loyal element in Keilah. (TLSB)

*wherever they could go*. Dispersed, making pursuit impossible, and canceling strategic disadvantage of confinement in the city. (YLSB)

**23:14** *desert strongholds.* Inaccessible places (see note on 22:4). (CSB)

*Desert of Ziph.* Located south of Hebron. (CSB)

Barren desert area close to Hebron. (TLSB)

*God*. The real director of these events. (TLSB)

*God did not give David into his hands.* The reality of God’s protection over David portrayed here contrasts sharply with the wishful thinking of Saul in v. 7. (CSB)

**23:1–14** The Lord protects His servant and frustrates the plans of the wicked, revealing His will not only in the word of the prophet but also by hindsight in the unfolding of events. Trust the Lord to answer your prayers and to protect you against those who make themselves God’s enemies. He is watching over you, though His presence may often be hidden by adverse circumstances. • Reveal to us Your will, dear Lord, and give us grace to follow it. Amen (TLSB)

**23:15** *Horesh*. C 5 mi S of Hebron. (TLSB)

**23:16** The Holy Spirit offers encouragement through Jonathan, who strengthened David’s morale. (TLSB)

*strengthened his hand in God*. OT expression describes heartening esp of those who feel dispirited (cf Is 35:3). (TLSB)

**23:17** *You will be king over Israel.* See notes on 18:4; 20:13, 16, 31. (CSB)

*I will be second to you.* Jonathan’s love and respect for David enable him to accept a role subordinate to David without any sign of resentment or jealousy (see notes on 18:3; 19:4). This is the last recorded meeting between Jonathan and David. (CSB)

In favor of God’s anointed, Jonathan abdicates any claim to kingship. In 15:26, Samuel announces God’s rejection of Saul’s kingship and, therefore, of his son’s succession. (TLSB)

*Saul knows this.* See 18:8 and note on 20:31. (CSB)

Saul heard the prophet’s word on this matter and surely realized his struggle to retain rule was hollow. (TLSB)

**23:18** *covenant.* See notes on 18:3; 20:14–15. (CSB)

Renewal of oath of loyalty sworn in ch 20. It was sincerely undertaken, though Jonathan did not eventually have the opportunity of being next to King David. (TLSB)

*before the Lord*. Agreement is made with God present as a witness. (TLSB)

**23:19** *strongholds.* Inaccessible places (see note on 22:4). (CSB)

Fairly precise directions are offered to Saul. (TLSB)

*Horesh*. Cf v 15. (TLSB)

*Hachilah*. In Judean hills southeast of Hebron. (TLSB)

**23:20** *our part*. Might imply their duty, which falls short of actually delivering David themselves. (TLSB)

**23:21** *blessed by the Lord*. Saul’s blessing sounds worthless from the lips of one who had ordered the slaughter of priests (cf Jas 3:10). (TLSB)

**23:22** *make yet more sure*. Saul demands that they give the precise location to the very footprint. (TLSB)

*cunning*. Reports about David’s skills continue to reach Saul. (TLSB)

**23:23** *See* … *and take note*. Repetition betrays Saul’s anxiety and insecurity. (TLSB)

**23:24** *Maon*. Desert area south of Hebron. (TLSB)

*Arabah*. The Rift Valley through which the Jordan River runs. (TLSB)

**23:25** *was told*. Passive voice sometimes alludes to God’s actions. One of the Ziphites likely supplied the warning. (TLSB)

**23:26** *the mountain*. “The rock” in v 25. (TLSB)

*closing in*. Implies a pincer movement, from which there is no realistic hope of escape. (TLSB)

**23:27–28** Saul’s hopes, so close to fruition, are suddenly dashed. God’s intervention is implied. (TLSB)

**23:29** *Engedi*. Oasis by the cliffs of the western shore of the Salt Sea. (TLSB)

**23:15–29** Against the overwhelming opposition of Saul and his Ziphite informers, God spares David as Jonathan said He would. Remember that a word of encouragement from Scripture can be invaluable to someone in distress. The Lord is mighty to deliver His people. • We praise You, O God, for those You send to comfort us in our lowest times. Hear us for Jesus’ sake. Amen. (TLSB)