



The Upholder of Our Life

1 Samuel 23:1-29

Grace Church | 4.4.21

What we celebrate on Resurrection Sunday is the reality that out of the wilderness of death, Jesus Christ brought life. Because he lives, he can be our life. Because he rose, we rise with him into a new life forever. We are back today in the story of David, because David's story teaches us about Christ's story. It's a story about living by the grace of God.

Keep yourself in 1 Samuel 23 and turn with me to Psalm 54. As per usual this morning, the fact that David is not just a warrior and anointed king, but also a poet, helps us look behind the curtain of this narrative. I hope that as we have journeyed through David's time in the wilderness, it helps you understand the psalms in a new light. When David speaks of enemies hunting him, he is speaking from experience. When he speaks of the glory of divine deliverance, he sees it in his mind's eye. The subscript of this Psalm tells us that it was written in response to the betrayal David felt at the hand of the Ziphites, when they actively reveal his hiding location to King Saul. Let's read it in full.

O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth. For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves. Selah. **Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.** He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them. With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

A simple song, no doubt. David requests help, he cries out for it. There seems to be no one he can trust, even strangers throw him under the bus and seek his life. But he also sees that God is working—he will protect, vindicate, and deliver his people from every trouble, and so David gives thanks and worships God in offering. But I'd like to focus in on **verse 4**. The word "help" means just that, he is the God who helps. But the phrase there: "upholder of my life" is more interesting. When used other places in the Old Testament, the root of this word means things like "support, rest, or sustain". What is David praising God for? He is saying: "The Lord is the sustainer of my life." It's like in the hospital, after something traumatic happens and a patient's vital organs begin to fail. They can be sustaining, their life can be upheld, by machines that do the work of the body. It's called "life support." This is Psalm 54:4. David says: "God is my life-support". He is the upholder of my life.



Without his constant hand and consistent provision, I would cease to exist, both my physical and spiritual organs would fail.

The reality is that this is not just a truth for David, but also for each of us. Without the sustaining grace of God upholding our life we'd fall headlong into eternal death. And this is exactly the contrast we are picking up in in the life of Saul and David. Already Saul has lost touch with his life support, and all his actions lead to death. His companion is the murderer Doeg, he has lost the trust of the people and his own son. In relying on himself, he unplugged himself from life support and failed to even realize it.

David, in contrast, is in a dire situation if there ever was one. He is not “living his best life now”, but living as an outcast and rejected, sleeping in caves and hiding in wastelands. Two weeks ago in chapter 21 we noticed how needy and desperate David has become. He cannot rely on his own strength or charisma any longer—even his best laid plans backfire on him. And yet, God is his life. He brings to David food, a sword, followers, and even a prophet to guide him. We finished our text last week by seeing that God also brings him a priest, the last priest in all of Israel. Among all of these things, God has provided David a covenant friend: the prince of Israel himself, Jonathan son of Saul. In his neediness, David is on life support. But in his humility, he doesn't reject that divine help, he cherishes it, he praises God for it.

The story of our text today is the story of that life support. Once we realize our neediness, that we live in the wilderness of earth, and once we realize the evil schemes of the enemy all around us, those who are called check themselves into the hospital of grace, as it were, and plug ourselves into the life support of the Triune God. **So today you will walk away with three ways God upholds the life of his children in the wilderness of earth: Confidence, Community, and Worship.**

Confidence: We can trust God's guidance (1-14)

We begin our story in **verse 1**. David's scouts hear word that the Philistines are back in town. It's about time for the harvest, and they are sending raiding parties to steal grain from the fields around the walled city of Keilah. Apparently they have no way of defending their crops, and they run the risk of famine and starvation from these attacks. What is David's immediate response? **Verse 2**, he inquires of the Lord, probably through the prophet Gad who had joined his party.

This is a decisive break, a turning point for David. Previously as he is thrust into the wilderness he is scattered, fearful, and makes suspect decisions. Now he is beginning to develop trust in God and his way. This is shown more clearly in **verses 3-4**, as David's men question his decision making. This isn't mutiny, just feedback. They believe that what is keeping them alive is their stealth. To go out into the open and attack the Philistines is not only potentially dangerous, it reveals their position to Saul. But David is resolute to know the will of God, and he inquires again, receiving the same answer as before but stronger. The Philistines will be no match for David with Yahweh on his side.



Again we notice the contrast between Saul and David in **verse 5**. David is the savior of the people of Israel, Saul is only their slaughterer.

The centerpiece of this section in 1-14, however, is found in **verse 6**. Although we got the conversation between Abiathar and David last week, now we get the timing. He comes to David while he is at Keilah. What is significant is what Abiathar brings with him: the ephod. Remember that the name ephod is used to describe two things. All the priests wore a linen ephod, a kind of sleeveless garment that signified their priesthood. But there was a special, specific ephod as well. This ephod, usually worn by the high priest, had held a priest piece or pouch which contained the Urim and the Thummim, which were used to cast lots and determine the will of God. This special Ephod kept by the priests was a God-ordained way of communicating with his people through the intercession of the priests. And when Abiathar alone escapes from the slaughter of the priests at Nob, he brings with him this ephod.

Notice what this means—David now not only has a prophet of God in his midst, he also has the sole priest of Israel from the line of Eli, and the ephod by which he may consult with God directly. As this verse acts as the center of this section, it draws our attention to the theme being presented here: God is speaking and guiding David.

And David needs it, because in **verse 7-8** his situation worsens. The fear of his men has come true; Saul has heard of their whereabouts in Keilah, and since Keilah is a walled city, he knows that he has an opportunity to trap David inside and siege him out. The wide open spaces of the wilderness are beneficial to those with speed, but the walled city is to Saul's advantage, since he musters, as the text says *all* the people to meet David and his small band of men. Saul is unwilling to protect his own people from the threat of the Philistines, but is more than willing to use his army to besiege his own city.

David has two questions of the Lord in **verses 9-12**. First, will the men of Keilah hand him over. Second, will Saul come down to take advantage of Keilah's willingness? The answer to both is yes. Saul is willing to do whatever it takes to get David, even destroying his own city. The men of Keilah on the other hand, have no doubt heard about the murderous rampage of Saul at Nob. They are not willing to die to protect David from destruction that is headed their way anyway, even after he was delivered them from the Philistines. So he sets out in **verse 13**, "wherever they could go", implying they have no real plan. Their journey to Keilah has put them in serious danger. They took a risk, and in many ways, it did not pay off.

Saul gives up his assault on Keilah, but he does not give up searching for David. David's departure in **verse 14** to Ziph and the word "strongholds" do not imply actual buildings or fort, but rather land that is easy to hide in, precisely because it is barren and rocky and hilly. As David moves on to Ziph, surviving somehow in the harsh wilderness climate, God continues to hide him from Saul.

We get a final picture of the theme of this section by the repetition of a familiar word: "hand". Notice how it is used in relation to God's providence and will. **Verse 4**, God tells David, "I will give



the Philistines into your hand.” **Verse 7**, Saul naively thinks he is in God’s will. He never asks God, he just assumes from the evidence he sees. Then again **verse 11 and 12**, David asks God: “will the men of Keilah surrender me into the hand of Saul?” Finally **verse 14**, the narrator ties the knot on this theme for now by giving us the definite answer to Saul’s folly: “God did not give [David] into his hand.”

All of this “hand” language shows us what is really going on. David is moved by the hand of God—Saul is not. David is guided by the will of God, Saul is not. David, the one in the wilderness, chased and hunted down, is the one in God’s will.

Christian, you may have days where you consider your life and you ask: “how can it be that I am under the hand of God?” The wilderness of this earth may trick you into relying on yourself, but here is the promise of God to all who are his: he will guide you in the wilderness. Life is full of uncertainty, every day we step into a cloudy haze of possibilities. But in God there is certainty. You want to know where to find the guidance of God? The same place David did: through the mediation of the priest. I cannot put it better than the commentator Dale Ralph Davis here:

...In principle there is no difference between this elect king and myself. In what context was Yahweh’s guidance given? Was it not in access to God through the appointed priest? And is that not the privilege I enjoy? Through a much greater one than Abiathar? What, after all, does Hebrews 4:14-16 mean? “Since we have a great high priest” we come to the throne of grace and find grace “for help at just the right time.” Knowing whether Saul will come to Keilah can’t be any better than that.¹

Church, Jesus Christ came and died and rose to be for your confidence before God. When you are grafted into union with him by the Spirit, your foot may slip, but you will never be outside of the hand of God. Everyday he is inching you closer to your final destination with him. Every moment his Word in the Scripture and his Incarnate Word Jesus Christ is the light to your path. There is no greater certainty than knowing we have a high priest who is guiding us and carrying in himself towards glory. When you feel unsure—remember that part of belonging to God is that his hand is always guiding you. It’s part of the deal, part of the life support.

Let me share with you what I believe to be a great benefit of our confidence in God’s guidance. Our confidence gives us purpose. And that purpose oftentimes looks scary. Notice what David does. Because of his faith in God’s guidance and revealed word, he goes into an incredibly risky situation. Those around him told him it was unwise, but David didn’t listen. He put himself, and even his men and the people of Keilah, in harms way. Why? Because he knew it was right—he was listening and trusting the guidance of God.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel*, 238. I owe much to this commentary for this sermon. While my outline was drawn before consulting this book, the applicable conclusions pulled out by Ralph Davis were spot on, particularly in relation to our confidence in Christ the priest and the familial community we have in friendship with Christ ourselves. Without running the risk of copycatting, I simply say his commentary on this text influenced my thoughts greatly to a positive effect.



It is for this reason that Christians have always believed that risk is right. It's why the apostles did not consider their own lives to be of value, but went with boldness to fulfill the great commission. It's why many early Christians continued to thrive and hold firm even if it put them in immediate danger. As John Piper says: "Better to Lose Your Life Than to Waste It". The Christian who has confidence in the hand of God is always ready to do what God calls, even if it is dangerous and risky.

Now, I am not advocating for foolishness. You can take risk in a way that is completely unwise, that does not say "I trust God", but rather "I trust myself". And yet, faith-Based risk taking is always wiser than fear-based caution. And I think faith naturally leads us towards situations that others may deem risky. It leads us towards risky social situations, where others may see us as awkward or strange. It leads us towards risky cultural situations, where we are misrepresented and called bigoted or hateful or just plain stupid. It may even lead us towards risky physical situations, where we are called to put our own comfort or safety aside for the sake of God's will.

And this year, we've all had to wrestle with our theology of risk, haven't we? COVID has forced that on us. And we have all come to differing conclusions, and that is ok. There is nuance: what is foolish for one may be not for another. But the standard for all of us is the same: is God the upholder of our life? Or is it our safety protocols? Friends, when in the wilderness of this world you feel weak and needy, and evil and disease and death feels like it's closing in on you... do you trust God enough to seek him? To go, by way of your high priest Christ, to discern his will no matter if it leads you to risky places?

By the gospel, you can have confidence and trust in God's guidance. Jesus Christ took the risk of the cross, trust continually in the Father to the point of death and burial. And he did it, so that he could be your life support.

Community: We can strengthen one another (15-18)

Let me give you some more good news. In the wilderness, God does not abandon his people. He gives them one another. What happens in **verse 15-18**? Saul can't seem to track David down, but God guides Jonathan to David. Notice again in **verse 16**, the use of the word "hand". God's hand brought Jonathan to strengthen David's hand in God. This is about providence. Jonathan is not giving David a nice pep talk, he is strengthening him *in* God. When we talk about Community Group at grace we talk about Gospel-Centered belonging. This is belonging that is not based on mutual interest, but on the mutual grace of God. We strengthen one another in God.

It's also a costly action. The introduction of Jonathan again as Saul's son shows us how mind boggling this is: Jonathan is willing to give over his own right as prince for the encouragement of his brother David.



This action of Jonathan is also intentional. Just as David risks his life for the people of Keilah, Jonathan risks his life for David. When David suffers, Jonathan suffers. When you are feeling isolated, you may not truly believe it, but your brothers and sisters and Christ feel your suffering. You are not a burden to them, you are not a weight. The risk we take in caring for one another is a right risk.

Notice Jonathan's words to David in **verse 17**. He gives him words of confidence, word of promise. But this is not just Jonathan's promise, is it? It's God's promise. Jonathan's main mode of encouragement is a reminder of the promises of God. God has promised that David will be king, and God will see to it. Jonathan provides the surety of God's promise: *he will do it*. This is the encouragement that the community of faith, past and present, gives us. Church membership is assurance—life together is all about assurance of God's promise to keep us in Christ forever.

In truth, community of faith is *how* we are assured of the promises of God. Baptism speaks our assurance in God's promises, so does the Supper, corporate worship, and confession of sin. If we never confess our sins out loud, together with other brothers and sisters in Christ, we will never get the chance to hear from the lips of another: "God has forgiven you in Christ." I like how Bonhoeffer puts it:

As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God. Mutual, brotherly confession is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of divine forgiveness.²

In other words, the promises of God become real when they are spoken over us in our time of need by someone who is united to Christ by faith and by the Spirit speaks the word of God out. Through the local church, God is incarnating his promises.

At every wedding I officiate I make sure to take notice of a very special part in the ceremony, where the Father of the Bride walks her down the aisle to where I stand with the groom. Then he takes the hand of his daughter and places it in the hand of the groom. It's a picture of a selfless act. It's what John the Baptist is speaking of when he calls himself the "friend of the bridegroom". It's not something that gets the most attention, but it's so vital. As Christians, we have the opportunity in the context of Christian community to be that friend of the bridegroom for one another. When we give each other the gospel, we are "Placing our brothers and sisters hand into the hands of God." We are giving them over to their bridegroom.

And so in **verse 18**, David and Jonathan again renew their covenant. This is the last time they will see each other. But this is a covenant they will both take with them forever. As we talked about a few weeks ago, their love and commitment is not sealed in being best buddies who share a few beers and watch football games together. The basis of their love is covenant.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*



We too have a brother, a greater Jonatha, with whom we share a covenant bond. When you feel as if no one understands, when you are utterly abandoned, God may send you a Jonathan. But truly what he is doing is sending himself. In the incarnation of Christ, God came down to strengthen our hands. Look at Paul's language in 2 Timothy 4:16-17,

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

Jesus Christ went into the mouth of the lion of death to bring you out. He came to you while you were hiding in the cave and preached through his life, death, and resurrection, the surety of the promises of God. And today he says to all the downcast: I'll be king, and you'll be with me. Nothing can snatch you out of my hand, nothing can cast you out of my people. For those who trust in Christ by faith, this is the promise of the wilderness. Our triune God upholds our life by the family of faith in his Son. And all of this, this resurrection into new life, we do together.

Worship: We can wonder at the ironies of Grace (19-29)

The last part of our story is interesting. There is a serious build in tension I want you to notice, theatrical almost in its literary style. First, in **verse 19**, the Ziphites rat David out. This is the occasion for Psalm 54, which we read earlier. Perhaps they think they can gain something for Saul, or perhaps they did it in fear and self-preservation. Either way, in **verse 20** they go directly to Saul the king. Notice Saul's conniving response in **verse 21**. He attempts to bless them, but what blessing can he give? All his favor is gone and now with David. So **verses 22-23** Saul sends them out to lay the trap. Saul is taking every measure to make sure that this time David can't slip through his fingers. He is cunning and sly—he knows that if he can trap him, he can outnumber him easily.

You can almost see the movie montage of **verses 24-26**. Inch by inch, Saul gains ground. Eventually they come to two sides of one mountain. In striking distance, just a bit of breathing room. David is doing his best, but he's running out of energy. You can hear the futility in the text. Saul and his men were closing in on David to capture him. It's that moment right when there seems to be no logical hope. And then, suddenly, from nowhere, comes the messenger to Saul.

There is a famous plot piece in literature known as *deus ex machina*. It means "God from the machine". Sometimes, when the author wants to totally surprise the audience, they will use this plot piece, where an unexpected divine power or event saves a seemingly hopeless situation at the very last moment, often without explanation. Typically it's seen as a cop out. But here it is the story. At the very last moment, God steps in. How dramatic of him.



Saul is told that the Philistines are attacking his land directly. He has no choice: if he wants to have a kingdom to return to at all, he must turn his army around. So the place is called *The Rock of Escape*, because at that place David narrowly escaped death.

Consider how David felt in this moment. He has exhausted his options. No one is on his side, no one is coming to save him. He is so outnumbered that there is no physical way he can get out of this one. Literally the only way he escapes is through divine intervention. Where does his rescue come from? The hand of his own enemies, the Philistines. Do you see the humor here? The irony? Just as Saul is reaching out to strike his blow against David, there is a tap on his shoulder. “Hey Saul, you uh, real enemies are attacking. You know, the Philistines?” he enemies of God have become the Savior—the great irony of Providence that we touched on last week. God is so sovereign that his greatest enemies end up just fulfilling his own will.

And God has perfect timing, because David is struck by the narrowness of his escape. God makes it perfectly clear no one can get the credit for this one except himself. So what does David do? He pens Psalm 54. He whips out his harp. He calls forth the band, and he worships.

One of my favorite hymns was written in a moment like this. The pastor Augustus Toplady was traveling home along a gorge when caught in a vicious storm. Fearing for his life, he slipped into a small hole in the rock, at the very moment he thought he would never find shelter. In that hole he penned the rough draft of the hymn “Rock of Ages”.

Such is the way of following Christ. It’s our songs that we sing in the night that have the most gusto. We are most clear-headed to God’s glory when we recognize how we have been delivered right at the precise moment. Like Galatians 4:4 says, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son.” Not too soon, not too late. When Moses and the Israelites crossed over the Red Sea on dry land, just as the Egyptians were about to catch them, what did they do? They sang. When Hezekiah was deathly sick, right on the doorstep of death, and he prayed and was miraculously healed, what did he do? He sang. And when the seven seals close off the scroll of God in Revelation 5, and John begins to weep because no one is worthy to open this scroll, at the very moment when hope is lost, what happens? Christ, the Lamb of God, appears, and all of heaven breaks out into song:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God... “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Friends, the wilderness is real. This life is hard. Wake up this morning and realize that you aren’t kicking because you are sustaining yourself. No, we are all sustained by the life support that tis the hands of our Triune God. But that life support is not just keeping us alive. By grace, if we trust in Christ, that life support is growing us and sanctifying us into glory. It may not feel like it, but today and every day you have taken one small step towards glory. Christ, like David, was rejected by his own people and hunted down. He was hunted to the point of death—he literally went down into



the grave. You realize that is the news we celebrate today: the grace was conquered. What could be more ironic that that—that by the means of death God would bring life everlasting! What grace is this, what providence is this, at the very moment, the very moment when we are most weary and ready to give up, when we feel as if our hope is buried... he lives to be our life.

