



The King of the Wilderness

1 Samuel 20:1-42

Grace Church | 2.28.21

Some of my best memories in life have come from my time in National Parks and National Forests—getting sort-of lost, carrying a backpack with a tent and some food on my back with friends into the wilderness. I suppose I owe a lot of this joy to President Theodore Roosevelt, who in his tenure helped spur the creation of national land and parks. My wife recently told me an interesting story about Theodore Roosevelt. I'll let historian David McCullough tell it:

“Once upon a time in the dead of winter in the Dakota Territory, Theodore Roosevelt took off in a makeshift boat down the Little Missouri River in pursuit of a couple of thieves who had stolen his prized rowboat. After several days on the river, he caught up and got the draw on them with his trusty Winchester, at which point they surrendered. Then Roosevelt set off in a borrowed wagon to haul the thieves cross-country to justice. They headed across the snow-covered wastes of the Badlands to the railhead at Dickinson, and Roosevelt walked the whole way, the entire 40 miles. It was an astonishing feat, what might be called a defining moment in Roosevelt's eventful life. But what makes it especially memorable is that during that time, he managed to read all of Anna Karenina. I often think of that when I hear people say they haven't time to read.”¹

Teddy Roosevelt loved the wilderness, although he grew up in New York City. The wilderness, as it is, is a place of beauty and wonder: but also, of wild fear and uncertainty. Today in our text marks a bit of a turning point in the story of first Samuel. For really the rest of our time in 1 Samuel, David will be in the wilderness: not chasing down thieves, but being chased like one. In the chapters ahead, there are 15 separate “wilderness stories”: you might call them the Adventures of David, if you will, and today we will cover three of those stories. For years, David lives on the run, with no stable roof over his head. Plenty of time to read Tolstoy.

And what I find interesting about this part of our story is it is full, as a jaunt in the wilderness is, with both beauty and bravery and fear, trepidation, and danger. In the Biblical witness, entering into the wilderness usually signifies a time of testing. It was for Moses, for the Israelites, and for Jesus. So too it is for David—before he sits on the throne of Israel, he must overcome the wilderness.

¹ David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*



Many of the same themes we have seen come up in David's life will be present today and the rest of the book of 1 Samuel: God's protection, provision, providential care of David, strengthening of David. But what is so curious today in our text is that it is the first time, as David enters into the wilderness, where we see his weakness as a clear centerpiece of the text. Here in Chapter 21 and 22, David is not portrayed as the bold, confident warrior we have come to view him as. Rather, he comes across hungry, needy, desperate, willing to take risks, alone and exposed and unsure of his next step.

And without sounding too trite, the reality is that every Christian in this room should be able to identify with the journey through the wilderness. The wilderness is the place where we have no home, and we have to make due. And what are Christians, except those who are journeying through the wilderness of this life to our true home with our triune God in the world to come? It's why 1 Peter calls us, "aliens and strangers" and why the author of Hebrews, after detailing the lives of the most well-known saints of old, says: "All these died in faith... having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."

This earth is not our home, and while it has great comforts of grace here and there, compared to the world to come it is nothing but wilderness. And if that is true, then we should not be surprised when we face trials and enemies and hunger and fear and uncertainty. Sure, we can develop our habits of survival in this harsh, sin-stained land, and even taste some of its beauty, but ultimately, our living on the earth only continues to reveal to us our neediness. Slowly and surely, we are wasting away, longing for home.

My goal this morning in our text is to show you the grace of God in the wilderness is most manifest not by overcoming your neediness, but in the midst of your neediness. When you walk out of here today, my job will be accomplished if you recognize that the neediness of the wilderness is where God's grace in Christ shines brightest this side of eternity.

In the wilderness of earth, the needy in Christ are given holy provision, the desperate in Christ are given divine deliverance, and the lowly in heart draws the needy and desperate to him for protection and purpose.

The needy in Christ are given provision (21:1-9)

David's neediness is immediately shown to us in **verses 1**. He comes first thing out of Gibeath to Nob, just a few miles southeast. He runs and flees without supplies, without a thought-out plan, and with only a few companions. The only place he can go is a place he knows: the tabernacle at Nob. David would have been familiar with Ahimelech and the place of worship because he would need to sometimes frequent there in order to prepare himself ritually before a battle campaign. The reason Ahimelech comes to meet him trembling, however, is because David has never come like this. He no doubt knows of the tensions of Saul, and so it is outright suspicious for David to appear without a battalion of well-stocked men. David's response to Ahimelech's fear is a bit of



misdirection. In **verse 2** He tells him he is on a secret mission for the king, going so far as to dress it up by implying he is meeting some men later at “such and such” a place, and in **verse 3**, demanding some bread. Notice David never says the name “Saul”, but rather “the king”, which could be a hint that he is referring to his secret divine mission as well. Perhaps David wants to protect Ahimelech from any future conspiracy threats by keeping him in the dark, or perhaps he doesn't fully trust him. Either way, although Ahimelech will eventually agree, there is no doubt this is a strange request. It almost sounds comical doesn't it—David, the hero of Israel, doing his best to come up with a secretive story just snag a loaf of bread off the priest. How far David has fallen! His neediness is on full display: who can he trust to give him just a bite of bread?

To make the interaction stranger, the only bread available is the holy bread, the bread of the presence. In Leviticus 24 we read of the instructions to the priests: they are to bake unleavened loaves which they stack up in two piles on the Sabbath, six in each pile. The bread is for the priests to eat during the week, and they eat this holy bread in a holy place. It's why before offering this bread, the priests have to make sure in **verses 4-5** that David and his men are ceremonially clean, as the priests would be. David assures them that they are: when they go out on a mission they keep a kind of nazirite vow, so as to always remain holy before the Lord.

In **Verse 7** we get a bit of foreshadowing. Doeg the Edomite is a servant of Saul, apparently at the temple in order to participate in some purification rituals. He is chief of Saul's herdsman, which would mean either some sort of statesman or bodyguard. Flocks are important, so this is a high official in Saul's court. Perhaps David recognizes him, and this is why he makes a second request of Ahimelech.

In **verse 8** and we see David's neediness even more on display. He is wandering the wilderness with no weapon: spear or sword! He says it is because the king's business required haste, but this is even stranger than the bread. A warrior with no weapon is no warrior: a warrior asking a priest for a weapon, says one commentator, “is like a plumber asking to borrow a customer's pipe wrenches.”² Still, God provides in mysterious ways, because apparently unbeknownst to David, there is a sword available at the tabernacle: the sword of Goliath, which David used a few years before to behead the giant. It's only fitting that God is equipping David in his need with a weapon that calls back to when God used his weakness to save Israel.

Now, on the surface what is going on here is a story about God's provision of David in his need. This is true, but there are other murmurings underneath the surface. The most curious grammatical piece of this text is in the repetition of the word “hands” in **verse 3** and **8**. In **Exodus 29** and **Leviticus 8** we find the instructions for ordaining priests into God's service. In both chapters the word “hand” is repeated again and again. Basically what would happen is the flesh and insides of the sacrificial animal is laid on the hands of the priests: a sign that he could from then on offer sacrifice and eat from the sacrificial meat of the temple. This ordination process literally

² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, 216.



translates in Hebrew as “the filling of the hands”.³ Here, we see a picture of what is going on here. David, in accepting the bread of the temple, is “filling his hands” with the sacrifice, a type of ordination service. David, although not a priest himself, is receiving the nourishment of the priestly office. Here is a sign from God: he will provide for David in the wilderness not just with physical bread, but with the holy sacrifices of the priests!

All of this Jesus himself alludes to in discussing the Sabbath in Matthew 12 and Mark 2. When the pharisees try to condemn him for eating and drinking on the Sabbath, he brings up this story. He proclaims that “the Son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath”, and “something greater than the temple is here.” What does he mean? Jesus means that the provision of the Lord, the rest of Sabbath, and the sustaining bread we need to survive, does not come from the rules and regulations of the temple, it comes from the Lord of the temple! In other words, the regulations of the temple that said “only priests can eat the bread” are meant to point to Jesus Christ, who calls himself: the bread of life. It is right for David to appeal for the bread, but first he needs to receive the holy ordination like a priest.

And so, church, it is right for you to ask for holy bread in the wilderness. But first, you must receive the ordination of priesthood: and you do that, as David did, by opening up your hands to Jesus Christ in faith and being united to him. He is the great high priest who welcomes us into himself to become the priesthood of believers, who share in all the blessings of God’s presence.

And how does this come to us? It comes in our need. At the right time, Romans says, Christ died for the ungodly. When we were the hungriest, cast off in the wilderness of sin and looking for bread, we come to the temple of God and ask for provision and for equipping. And Jesus Christ our priests meets us there and feeds us himself with the bread of his presence. And not only that, like David receives the sword of Goliath, we receive the Sword of the Spirit through Christ, the word of God which is our weapon in the wilderness. All of this, as it comes to David, does not come to us because we take it by force of will. It comes to us when in weakness, we ask for it. In the scheme of the gospel, weakness becomes our food and our weapon. Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, says Christ, and feed on me by faith.

One of my favorite songs is by the writer Nathan Partain, it’s called: “I Need Jesus.” In the song he recounts how, after becoming a Christian, he has come to realize his sin and his need is even more serious than he first thought. In fact, the longer he follows Jesus, the more it just uncovers his inadequacy! But ultimately, this is a beautiful place to be. He ends his song with this verse:

Now I say, "Glory! Hallelujah!", I'm so glad to be redeemed!
To be so desperate for Jesus and so gloriously weak,
I do not ever want to stray from the Community of Need,
O may I never leave dependence or forsake my Food and Drink.

³ Thanks to Peter Liethart, *A Son to Me*, 126.



I pray we can be a church that is a community of need, desperate for Jesus and glorious weak. Dependence on Christ is our food and drink. If you feel needy in the wilderness of this broken world, good. You are right where God wants you. All you have to do is humble yourself to the point of opening up your hands to receive the provision of God in Christ by the Spirit.

The desperate in Christ are given deliverance (21:10-15)

The next wilderness story takes us into even more danger. **Verse 10**, For some reason David, sword of Goliath in hand, decides to head straight for the Goliath's hometown of Gath. Maybe David thought the king of Gath, an enemy of Saul would think: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Perhaps David thought he could persuade the king to give him asylum on a promise he could work against Saul. Either way, the plan fails. Immediately the people of Gath recognize him. What do they say about him in **verse 11**? Forget Saul, they fear David more. This is not looking good for David.

David's choice of Gath highlights for us his severe desperation. Not only is he in need of food and weapons, he is so desperate for asylum and shelter he goes into the house of his enemy! Psalm 56 was written at this time, and tells us of David's state of mind as he realizes in his desperation he has walked out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life. - Psalm 55:1-2, 5-6

Before Rome became a republic, the famous revolutionary Lucius Brutus feigned insanity so as to not appear a threat to his uncle the king until the time was right to stir the people into overthrowing the monarchy. In Latin, Brutus is now translated to mean "slow" or "stupid". But Brutus' tactics were not original. David was on the run and hopelessly desperate, but God persevered him again by deception. **Verse 12** tells us he is afraid of the king, the first time in our book where we see David afraid. He resorts to feigned lunacy, stretching incoherently on the city gates and walls and foaming at the mouth. At this time, the custom was to let those who were insane to roam outside the city and cast them out. So King Achish, unable to perceive David as a threat, throws him out of his presence.

After David escapes from Gath, he pens another psalm, Psalm 34, which is worth reading in length.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together! I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all



his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.- Psalm 34:1-5, 17-22

In the desperation of the wilderness, there will be plenty of times where it seems like you have nowhere else to go but into the arms of the enemy. But here is the promise of the gospel: desperation always leads to deliverance for those in Christ. The sin that clings closely is slowly losing its grip, the anxiety that keeps you up at night is slowly fading into eternal rest. God *will* deliver his people: from all fears, from all troubles. He saves the desperate: those who are brokenhearted and crushed in Spirit. Your afflictions may be *many*, but make no mistake: God will deliver you from them *all*. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned, what a promise!

I love the mystery of David's true identity, because it reminds me of Jesus, who intentionally hid himself from the eye of the public until the time was right. Like David, people accused him of madness and foolishness, of being possessed by a demon. Like David, he knew that too much fame is a recipe for disaster. Unlike David, Jesus eventually revealed himself, and exactly what would have happened to David happened to him: his enemies handed him over to death. Jesus took this willingly, appearing desperate on the cross as he was mocked and breathed slow, laboring breathes all the way to death. Why? To provide, as David was provided, a way of escape. You don't have to feign madness to escape the hands of the enemies of the wilderness: Jesus did it for you. David's face was not radiant as he foamed at the mouth, and Christ's face looked less than radiant as it dripped blood from the crown of thorns. But because of Christ, all who look to him are radiant, with unashamed faces.

Desperation is right where God wants you. It means if you trust him, he is ready to deliver you, just as he already has in Jesus Christ. When that becomes clear, your song will be: Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

The lowly in heart draws the needy and desperate to him for protection and purpose (22:1-5)

I have one more point for you, and then I'll be in my seat. Look what comes next in chapter 22 **verses 1-2**. David still has no place to rest, so he has to choose a cave. But what is most interesting is what happens next. First, his family comes for shelter from Saul's wrath—even the brothers who are jealous of him. Who else is drawn in? The needy, the debtors and criminals, the bitter ones tired of serving a rejected king. He becomes their commander, their leader, the king of the wilderness outcasts.



And **verse 3-4**, he provides for them. He protects his parents by taking them to Moab. Remember David is a descendant of Ruth and Boaz, and Ruth is from Moab. So he's got a little Moabite in him, and seeks refuge for his aging parents there even though Moab is an enemy of Israel. So the vulnerable come to him and he provides protection. There is also purpose that is provided. The prophet Gad travels with him, and in **verse 5** tells David that although it sounds nice, his next steps are not further away from Saul, but towards him. David is to return to Judah. What is so interesting about this is that his men come with him. They aren't called to sit on their hands and run from the battle, but now under the banner of their new and rising king, they run to the battle. The poor and dejected have a new purpose under their new leader.

Friends, no clearer picture could be made of Jesus Christ than this. He is the suffering servant of God, the one rejected by men. He is the one who became poor, with no place to lay his head. He is the one who calls himself gentle and lowly in heart, who said he came not for the healthy but the sick.

And this humble, lowly king of the wilderness came for one purpose. He says it in John 12:32, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Who are the people Christ draws to himself? The *all* people, the salt of the earth people, the people no one would expect. Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, draws the needy, desperate, poor, sick, criminal, bitter people to him. And he provides them protection and purpose by outfitting them as subjects of his new kingdom.

Why did Jesus say that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle? Because rich men lack neediness. They lack desperation. Their physical abundance distracts them from their spiritual lack. So today, rich or poor, can you hear this from me: you are needy and desperate in your sin. And the sooner you realize that, the easier it will for you to be to follow Jesus wholeheartedly back into the wilderness of this world and do battle for his glory. Do you want to be counted as a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, an ambassador of his glory in this world. Do you seek his protection and his purpose? Then come with empty hands, needy and desperate.

Embrace your neediness and your desperation today, and turn to the king of the wilderness. He offers good news, gospel news, and that news isn't "come to me all who lack nothing and who have everything figured out." No, the gospel is: Christ comes to us in our need and desperation, and it's that dependence on him that is our food and our drink.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

