NOTHING WASTED

God's Reward for those who trust him with their cause

1 Samuel 26:1–25

Introduction

A few minutes ago, we held bread in our hand. We took the cup. And in that simple act, we remembered something — that the Son of God walked a road that cost him everything. That he was betrayed, falsely accused, and abandoned. And that through all of it — through every moment when he could have reached for what was rightfully his — he did not grasp for it. He entrusted himself to the Father. He went the way of doing what was right and remaining faithful, all the way to the end.

And the Father did not forget.

Not one moment of it was wasted.

I want us to hold onto what we just received at the Table. Because this morning, 1 Samuel 26 is going to ask us a question that the Table has already begun to answer.

We have been in this wilderness with David for several weeks. We have watched God shape him on the anvil of hardship. Two weeks ago we sat with him in the cave at Engedi and watched him refuse to take Saul's life. Last week we followed him into the ravine with four hundred armed men — and we heard Abigail's word ring across that wilderness like a bell: *the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord.*

David heard that word. He turned his men around. He released the claim. He entrusted his cause to God.

And then we open chapter 26. And where are we? We are back in the wilderness of Ziph.

The Ziphites. Saul. Three thousand chosen men.

If you have been with us, you know this scene. We have seen it before.

Back in chapter 24, at the cave of Engedi, we thought maybe something had shifted in Saul's heart. Saul came in alone — three thousand men waiting outside — and David had him completely at his mercy. But David did not take the opportunity. He let Saul walk out alive. And when Saul understood what had happened — when he realized that the man he was hunting had just spared his life — he wept. He confessed. Saul said to David, *you are more righteous than I.* He acknowledged that David would be king. He asked David to swear that he would not destroy his family. And David swore.

It seemed, for that moment, like the long nightmare of the wilderness might just be coming to an end.

And then chapter 26 opens with the Ziphites walking into Saul's court telling him where David was.

And Saul circled the wagons and came back to seek for David.

Now — Saul hasn't changed at all. We know this because of what he does, not what he says. A man who has genuinely repented does not reassemble three thousand soldiers and march back into the wilderness to hunt the man he just confessed wronging. Just like . . . the husband who weeps in the counselor's office, swears everything is going to be different, and then walks back into the same patterns the following week. The tears were real. The repentance was not. Saul's confession evaporated. The oath dissolved. Three thousand of Israel's finest are moving through the wilderness of Ziph again, and the man leading them is the same man who wept outside the cave and swore it was over.

Saul had learned nothing.

So now David is here again. Same situation. Same choice. Except harder. Because this time, he knows what mercy produced last time. He knows that Saul's word is worth nothing. The test in chapter 26 is not the exact same as the test in chapter 24. It is a harder version of the same test — but this time it is stripped of hope, stripped of the possibility that this time might be different.

In other words, this repeat from the scene in chapter 24 is not an accident. It is the point.

Because there is a difference between making a right decision once — under pressure, with hope still alive — versus demonstrating a settled pattern of character when the pressure returns and the hope is gone. There is a difference between a single choice and a marked life. Between a moment and a lifetime of living.

What I want us to see this morning, across three scenes in this chapter, is what does it actually look like when trust in God has become a settled pattern rather than a single decision? What does that settled pattern actually look like? What does it look like in a dark camp with a spear stuck in the ground? What does it look like on a hillside at dawn? And what does it look like in a final conversation with a man who cannot be trusted to keep his word.

We see all of this in how David responds in these three scenes.

Scene One — In the Camp — Verses 6–12

Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the son of Zeruiah, "Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you." So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and Abner and the army lay around him. Then Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice." But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?" And David said, "As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. The LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head and the jar of water, and let us go." So David took the spear and the jar of water from Saul's head, and they went away. No man saw it or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen upon them.

Instead of running from the camp, David moves toward it.

Not toward Saul relationally. Not to reconcile. He is moving toward a situation that requires something of him. He is doing the right thing. And under cover of darkness, he and Abishai walk through the perimeter, past the sleeping soldiers, all the way to the center — where Saul himself lies asleep. His spear stuck in the ground beside his head. The symbol of his violent power. The same spear that had whistled past David's ear three times. Stuck in the ground. Two feet away.

And then young Abishai looks at the sleeping king. He looks at the spear. He looks at David.

And I want you to hear what he says, because he is not simply being bloodthirsty. He is making a theological argument.

God has given your enemy into your hand this day.

Think about that for a moment. He is not wrong about the providence. A supernatural sleep has fallen on three thousand soldiers. The most protected man in Israel is lying completely vulnerable, two feet away. Abishai looks at all of this and draws a reasonable conclusion — what else could this be but God opening a door?

Have we not made that argument? Not about a sleeping king. But about our own situations. Just like . . . the moment a difficult family member who has made your life miserable for two years suddenly makes a careless mistake — and the door swings open to expose them, to finally set the record straight, to make sure everyone in the family knows exactly what they have been doing. And something inside you says: *this is obviously God. Why else would this be sitting right in front of me?*

David does not dispute the providence. He does not say the soldiers sleep was coincidental. He says something more careful. More precise.

Who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?

And then — calmly, without anguish, without drama — he outlines three ways God might deal with Saul. Divine judgment. Natural death. Death in battle. Three possibilities. All of them in God's hands. But none of them requiring David's spear.

He has learned something the wilderness alone can teach. The difference between a God-arranged circumstance and a God-authorized action. They are not always the same thing.

Abishai had the argument ready. The whole army was asleep. And David?

. . . David took the spear and left the man breathing.

I want to use a word for what David does here, and I want to handle it carefully because it carries baggage for some of us it was never meant to carry. The word is righteousness. Not self-piety. Not moral superiority. Not the posture of someone who has arranged their spiritual resume and would like you to notice.

Righteousness, as demonstrated by David here, is simply this: doing what is right when wrong is available, when wrong could be arguably justified, and when wrong costs you nothing. It is the refusal to compromise what is true and good even when compromise might have a theological argument behind it.

That is what David does in this camp. No one would have blamed him. Abishai had the argument ready. The whole army was asleep.

David says, *"Who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?"*

This is what righteousness looks like. Not the absence of temptation. ***Righteousness is doing what is right when wrong is available, justified, and costs nothing.*** It is the presence of a theological and moral conviction strong enough to govern my behavior when the pressure to act otherwise is at its highest. When the argument for compromise is at its most compelling. When no one would blame you.

No one saw it. No one knew.

Only Abishai. And God.

And here is what I want us to hear. Nothing done in the dark before the eyes of God is wasted. Not one act of restraint. Not one moment of doing right when wrong was easier. God was the witness in that camp when no one else was watching. And what God witnesses, God does not forget.

Scene Two — On the Hillside — Verses 13–16

David and Abishai slip out of the camp. They cross to a hillside a safe distance away.

And then David does something I find quietly extraordinary.

He does not simply disappear into the wilderness with the proof of his restraint tucked under his arm.

He calls out.

Then David went over to the other side and stood far off on the top of the hill, with a great space between them. And David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Will you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner answered, "Who are you who calls to the king?" And David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the LORD's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is and the jar of water that was at his head."

David addresses Saul's army. Specifically, he addresses Abner — the commander. The most decorated soldier in Israel. The man whose entire identity is bound up in protecting the king. And what David says to him is not a taunt.

It is a rebuke.

Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king?

Let that land.

The man Saul is hunting — the man who was inside that camp an hour ago and could have ended all of this — is now rebuking Saul's own general for failing to protect him.

David is more committed to Saul's safety than the people whose job is Saul's safety.

He uses the same phrase to rebuke Abner that he used to restrain Abishai: he refers to Saul as *the Lord's anointed.* Saul deserves protection — not because Saul has earned it. Not because David owes him anything. Not because there is any remaining hope that protecting Saul will produce anything good for David. But because God placed Saul in that office. And David is committed to what God established. *What we see here on the hillside is* ***faithfulness is demonstrated as covenantal loyalty grounded in God's character, not the other person's conduct.***

I want us to stay here for a moment, because this is the hardest kind of faithfulness to sustain.

Faithfulness grounded in a person's conduct is really just reciprocal faithfulness. I will honor this as long as you honor it. I will keep this up as long as keeping it produces something. Just like . . . the employee who works with integrity only when the boss is watching, or the spouse who is kind only when kindness is being returned, or the church member who serves faithfully only until the church disappoints them. That kind of commitment evaporates the moment the other person stops holding up their end. And honestly — reciprocal faithfulness was always self-interest. It was just dressed up in spiritual language.

What David is demonstrating on this hillside is something different. David not only spared Saul's life, but he is rebuking Saul's commander for failing to protect Saul. This is a faithfulness to the Lord that Saul did not create and cannot cancel. It is a keeping-of-faith grounded not in what Saul has done — but in who God is.

And nothing done in faithfulness before the eyes of God is wasted. Not one act of keeping faith when breaking it would have been easier. Not one quiet moment of honoring what God established when no one required it of you. God was watching from that hillside too.

Abner says nothing.

There is nothing to say.

The spear is gone. The man Saul was hunting just protected the man Saul's army failed to protect. In other words, David just protected Saul. Why? because David was being faithful to God's plan.

Scene Three — A Final Conversation —Verses 17–22

And then next, Saul recognizes David's voice across the valley.

And what follows is the last conversation these two men will ever have. Neither of them knows that. But our text knows it.

Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord, O king." And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth away from the presence of the LORD, for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains." Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake." And David answered and said, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and take it."

Saul's confession in verse 21 goes further than anything he has offered before. He calls himself a fool. Admits he erred greatly. Promises not to harm David. And then — he invites David to return.

Come back, my son David.

Now we find out something important. Not just about what David will do. But about what righteousness and faithfulness actually look like when they have become a settled pattern rather than a single decision.

David's response is this. He offers to return the spear.

Graciously. Without condition. Without leverage. *Let one of your young men come over and take it.* He holds nothing back. There is no demand attached. No debt called in. Whatever Saul owes him — the years of pursuit, the broken oath, the wasted mercy of the cave — David is not collecting it. He is returning what belongs to Saul and asking for nothing in return. His hands are open toward Saul.

Open.

But. I don't want us to miss this . . .

His hands are open toward Saul, but He keeps his distance.

His hands are open toward Saul. But he is keeping Saul at arm's length. Both. At the same time.

Some of you may have caught the tension. Earlier we saw David move toward the camp — toward Saul. Now we are seeing that he is keeping his distance. What's the difference? Which should David do? Which should we do?

The answer is — it depends entirely on what the situation requires.

When David moved toward the camp, it was not a relational move. He was not going to repair a friendship. He was moving toward a situation that required something of him. Doing the right thing and remaining faithful to God demanded action, and action required some proximity. He went toward the camp because doing right required it.

Now, however, when David declines to return to the court, the situation is entirely different. Saul is extending a relational invitation — *come back, resume your place, live under my authority again*. And David's wisdom gives him pause, David's wisdom about what trust requires means he will not return to the relationship. Not out of bitterness. He has already demonstrated with the returned spear that he holds nothing against Saul. He is not being vengeful. But he is being honest about what the history of this relationship has shown. Going

back would not be faith. It would be naivety dressed up as reconciliation. So he keeps his distance — not with a clenched fist, but with open hands and clear eyes.

Some of you need to hear this directly.

Forgiving someone and placing yourself back in relationship are two different things. Open hands do not require a closed distance. Just like . . . forgiving a friend who has repeatedly betrayed your confidence is not the same thing as continuing to tell them your secrets. You can release what they owe you without handing them the opportunity to do it again. Released debt does not automatically restore broken trust. Love is unconditional, but trust is not. David's hands are open — empty, extended, releasing what is Saul's. And he is keeping his distance from Saul. The text honors both without apology.

You see, ***Righteousness and faithfulness working together in a situation like this looks like open hands and closed distance at the same time.***

Saul says — one last time — *come back*.

And David?

. . . David returns the spear, and keeps his distance.

Three scenes. One pattern running through all of them.

In the camp — righteousness. Doing right when wrong was available, arguably justified, and would have cost nothing to choose.

On the hillside — faithfulness. Maintaining a covenant commitment grounded in God's character, when the other person's conduct had removed every ordinary human reason for keeping it.

In a final conversation — both righteousness and faithfulness working together. Open hands toward the person. Wise distance maintained. The wisdom to know that how close you stand is always determined by what righteousness and faithfulness require — not by what the other person deserves.

And now, in the last words he will ever speak to Saul, David names it. And what David says next becomes the main point of this sermon message:

The Declaration — Verses 23–24

The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for the LORD gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the LORD's anointed. Behold, as your life was precious this day in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the LORD, and may he deliver me out of all tribulation.

David says, The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness.

I would summarize it this way:

God rewards the righteousness and faithfulness of those who trust him with their cause.

I want us to be careful here, because I know what some of us do with a sentence like that. We hear it and immediately reach for a contract. *If I live this way, God will give me what I am owed. If I do right and keep faith, God becomes obligated.* And then when the reward does not come on our timeline, the whole framework collapses. God is found to have broken the deal. And we are left holding a righteousness that produced nothing.

That is not what David is saying.
His hands are open to God. And open hands do not grip instruments of exchange.

David is not demonstrating righteousness and faithfulness in order to earn his standing before God. He already has that standing — not because of anything he has done, but because of the God who chose him, called him, and anointed him before any of this wilderness began. David is not working his way into God's favor. He is living from within it. The righteousness and faithfulness on display in this chapter are not the root of his relationship with God. They are the fruit of it. The ground of his standing before God is grace. The expression of that grace in his life is a character that has been shaped, through wilderness and mercy and

the word of God, into something that does what is right and keeps trusting — not to be accepted, but because he already is.

The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness.

And David is not alone in this declaration. The author of Hebrews says that faith itself — genuine faith, the kind that actually draws near to God — requires believing this very thing. Listen to how he puts it (11:6):

Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Not a peripheral belief. Not an advanced spiritual insight reserved for the especially mature. A prerequisite. You cannot draw near to God at all without believing that he rewards those who seek him. The writer of Hebrews is saying that this conviction — that God sees, that God remembers, that God rewards — is not an optional add-on to faith. It is a significant part of the essence of what faith is. Strip out the belief in God's reward, and what you have left is not a purer, more selfless faith. It is not faith at all.

David arrived at this conviction through years of wilderness. The author of Hebrews enshrines it as the ground of all genuine approach to God. They are saying the same thing from different directions. The God who can be trusted is the God who rewards those who seek him.

But we have to ask the question the text is raising. What is this reward? What is David actually meaning when he says *The LORD rewards every man and he prays may my life be precious in the sight of the LORD?*

The reward he declares is not a payment. It is not a benefit distributed across a distance, by a God who remains detached from the transaction. The reward God gives for righteousness and faithfulness is nothing less than God himself — his presence, his vindication, his deliverance, and the resurrection that makes all of it certain and permanent. The reward is not compensation made between parties who remain separate. It is the communion of the creature with the Creator.

God rewards the righteousness and faithfulness of those who trust him with their cause.

I know some of you are thinking — *I have been doing what is right at great cost. I have kept the faith without reward. And I have watched other people receive what I was waiting for.*

That complaint is not a failure of faith. It actually expresses belief that God exists and that he rewards those who trust him. As I mentioned last week, the complaint has a long and honored history. The psalmists made it. Job made it. The martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6 make it — *how long, O Lord?* — and the answer they receive continues to be *a little longer*.

David's declaration *"The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness."* is not a claim about timing. It is not a claim about visibility. It is a claim about the character of God. The reward is certain because God is certain. When it comes is entirely in God's hands. Whether it comes is not in question.

Nothing entrusted to him is ever wasted.

Not one act of righteousness performed in the dark. Not one day of faithfulness that went unnoticed by every human being in your life. Not one moment of doing right when wrong was available and justified and easier. The God who watched David in that sleeping camp, the God who heard David rebuke Abner on that hillside, the God who is now hearing your prayers — God sees your faith. And nothing entrusted to him is ever wasted.

The Christological Landing

And here is where I want to bring us back to the Table.

Because Jesus demonstrated righteousness and faithfulness perfectly, and more completely than any human being in history — Jesus did not grasp at the kingdom, made emptied himself and made himself a servant. And prayed, *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*

He entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

And the Father? The Father did not leave His Son wasting in the grave.

. . . The Father raised him from the dead.

Nothing was wasted. Not the betrayal. Not the false accusations. Not the cross. What we held in our hands this morning — the bread, the cup — those are remembrances of the Son's perfect righteousness and faithfulness. The empty tomb is the Father's declaration. I did not forget. I did not overlook. Nothing was wasted. I rewarded the righteousness and faithfulness of my Son with a resurrection that nothing in heaven or earth can reverse. And everyone who belongs to my Son participates in what he received.

Conclusion

Each one of us came to worship this morning carrying something.

- Some of you are carrying the weight of doing-right that has cost more than you expected and produced less than you hoped.
- Some of you are carrying a faithfulness — in a marriage, in a friendship, in a commitment to this church — that has not been returned, and you are wondering in the quietest part of yourself whether the keeping of it means anything at all.
- Some of you are sitting with open hands, having released a grievance you had every right to hold, watching the person who wronged you move forward while you wait.
- And some of you, sadly, have not yet opened your hands to release the claim.

God rewards the righteousness and faithfulness of those who trust him with their cause.

That sentence is true because the tomb is empty. Not aspirationally true. Not hopefully true. True the way sunrise is true — confirmed, certain, already guaranteed, waiting only to be fully revealed.

Nothing wasted. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Let's pray.

Father, we have been at your Table and now we have been in your Word, and both of them are saying the same thing — that nothing is ever wasted. Some of us are tired. Some of us are carrying the weight of a faithfulness that has not been returned and a righteousness that has gone unnoticed by everyone except you. Lord, we need you — not with easy answers, but with the certainty of your

character, confirmed at the cross, declared at the empty tomb. Send us from this place the way you sent David from that hillside — going our way, with open hands, trusting you with our cause. We pray in the name of the one whose righteousness and faithfulness you rewarded with resurrection and a name above every name. Amen.