

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: David in the Cave; Saul's Life Spared

1 Samuel 22:1-24:22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to help the class see two hearts side by side under pressure and to feel the weight of the difference. Saul has the throne but is losing his soul, sliding from jealousy to suspicion to the cold-blooded murder of God's priests. David has nothing but a cave and a band of broken men, yet he keeps inquiring of the Lord and keeps his hand from the very throat of his enemy. Press the class to ask which heart is forming in them. The crisis does not create the heart; it reveals it.

Guide the discussion toward the central conviction that steadies David: he will not take by force what God has promised to give in God's time. He calls Saul "the LORD's anointed" and refuses vengeance, trusting that the God who anointed him will also establish him. This is the very posture Romans 12:19 commands and the very path Jesus walked, refusing to seize a crown apart from the cross. Keep the teaching anchored in the Old Testament narrative while letting it instruct us for our own day (Romans 15:4).

Be careful with the Nob massacre. Do not soften its horror, but do not sensationalize it either. Let it stand as a sober warning of where an unrepentant, God-deafened heart finally arrives, and let it drive the class not to judgment of Saul alone but to honest self-examination, lest any of us harbor the small jealousies that grow into great sins.

Question 1

Student Question:

What does David's gathering of the distressed, the indebted, and the discontented (22:1-2) reveal about the kind of people God draws to His anointed king, and how does that prepare us for the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

David has fled from Gath and come to the cave of Adullam, a limestone stronghold in the lowland hills between the Philistine plain and the Judean highlands. Hunted by Saul and unwelcome among the Philistines, he is at the lowest point of his exile. And it is here, at the bottom, that God begins to build something.

Notice the people who come. The text is unflinching: "every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men." These are

not the elite of Israel. They are the squeezed, the failing, the disappointed. Yet God forms David's future kingdom out of exactly these.

There is a pattern of grace here that runs straight through Scripture. The Lord delights to gather the people the world overlooks and to make them into something. Paul would later write that God chose the weak, the foolish, and the despised so that no flesh should glory in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). The cave at Adullam is an early picture of that.

David also tenderly secures his aged parents, taking them to the king of Moab for safety, and begins, at the prophet Gad's word, to move and act under divine direction. Even as a fugitive he is learning to live by the word of the Lord rather than by panic. The leader who will one day shepherd a nation is being shaped in obscurity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God characteristically gathers the broken and overlooked, not the impressive, to accomplish His purposes (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).
- David's lowest point becomes the seedbed of his future kingdom, a reminder that God works in our wilderness seasons.
- Honoring father and mother is woven even into a fugitive's flight (22:3–4), a quiet picture of enduring duty.
- Living by the prophet's word (Gad, 22:5) shows David ordering his steps by God's direction rather than fear.
- The Lord's church is still a gathering of the distressed, indebted, and discontented who have found refuge in the anointed King.

Discussion Prompts

- Why might God prefer to build His work through the broken and overlooked rather than the strong and self-sufficient?
- How does the company at Adullam foreshadow the kind of people Christ gathers into His church?
- What does David's care for his parents, even in flight, teach us about duty that does not pause for hardship?

Question 2

Student Question:

Who are the "distressed, indebted, and discontented" people God has placed in your life, and how might He be calling you to welcome rather than overlook them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now the scene shifts to Saul, and the contrast is jarring. Sitting under a tree in Gibeah, spear in hand, Saul accuses his servants of conspiring against him. His suspicion has metastasized. He imagines that even his own son Jonathan has stirred up David to lie in wait against him.

Doeg the Edomite, who had seen David at Nob, informs Saul that the priest Ahimelech inquired of the Lord for David and gave him bread and Goliath's sword. Saul summons the priests and, deaf to Ahimelech's honest defense, commands their execution. His own footmen refuse to lift a hand against the priests of the Lord. So Doeg does it: eighty-five priests, and then the whole city of Nob, men, women, children, and livestock, put to the sword.

This is the terrible fruit of a heart that has stopped listening to God. Jealousy became suspicion; suspicion became rage; rage became mass murder. Sin rarely announces its full intentions at the door. It enters small and grows. Saul who once hid among the baggage too humble to be king now slaughters God's priests too proud to repent.

One son of Ahimelech, Abiathar, escapes and flees to David, who receives him with grief and responsibility: "abide thou with me, fear not." Even in catastrophe, God preserves a remnant, and the survivor finds refuge with the anointed. The horror is real, and the mercy is real.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unchecked jealousy and suspicion, left to grow, end in atrocities the jealous heart never first imagined (James 1:14–15).
- Saul's servants refusing to kill the priests shows that even under a tyrant, conscience can still say no.
- Doeg the Edomite illustrates how an informer's words can be weaponized by a willing tyrant.
- The slaughter at Nob is presented as horror, not as anything God sanctioned, and must be taught soberly.
- God preserves a remnant in Abiathar, and the survivor finds refuge with David, a picture of mercy amid judgment.
- A God-deafened heart loses the capacity to feel the weight of its own evil.

Discussion Prompts

- Trace the steps from Saul's jealousy to the massacre; where could it have been stopped?
- Why do you think Saul's own footmen refused, while Doeg obeyed; what does that reveal about conscience?
- How does receiving Abiathar with "fear not" show the difference between David's heart and Saul's?

Question 3

Student Question:

How does the massacre of the priests at Nob (22:6–19) expose what jealousy and unchecked suspicion finally do to a heart that has turned from God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In chapter 23 the Philistines are robbing the threshing floors of Keilah, and David faces a decision. He does not march on impulse. He “enquired of the LORD,” asking whether he should go and fight. The Lord answers, David goes, and Keilah is delivered.

When his men are afraid, David inquires a second time, and God reassures him. Later, when Saul plots to trap David in Keilah, David uses the ephod that Abiathar brought and inquires again, asking the pointed questions: will the men of Keilah deliver me up? Will Saul come down? God answers honestly, and David escapes the trap.

The repeated phrase “enquired of the LORD” is the heartbeat of this chapter. David is a man who brings his real decisions to God before he acts. This is precisely the discipline Saul abandoned long ago; when Saul finally tried to inquire, the Lord no longer answered him (we will see this tragically in a later lesson).

For us, the lesson is not that we possess an ephod or expect new revelations; God has spoken fully in His Son and in the Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1–2; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). The abiding principle is the posture: a heart that genuinely seeks God’s will through His revealed word and prayer before charging ahead in self-confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- David repeatedly “enquired of the LORD” before acting (23:2, 4, 9–12), modeling dependence rather than presumption.
- Seeking God did not exempt David from danger or hard choices; it guided him through them.
- Saul’s self-direction contrasts sharply with David’s God-direction.
- We seek God’s will today through His completed word and prayer, not through ephods or new revelations (Hebrews 1:1–2).
- Genuine inquiry means being willing to obey the answer, even an inconvenient one.

Discussion Prompts

- What practical difference does it make to seek God’s will before a decision rather than after?
- How do we “enquire of the LORD” today now that He has spoken finally in His Son and the Scriptures?
- Why is being willing to obey the answer just as important as asking the question?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where do you sense suspicion, resentment, or jealousy quietly taking root in you, and what will you do before it grows into something destructive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 24 brings the famous cave at En-gedi. Saul, with three thousand chosen men, hunts David among the wild goat rocks. Then, in a scene almost comic in its irony, Saul enters a cave to relieve himself, the very cave where David and his men are hidden in the recesses.

David's men seize the moment as providence: "Behold the day of which the LORD said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand." Here is the temptation in its sharpest form. The enemy is helpless and exposed. The promise of the kingdom is real. One swift stroke and the long ordeal is over. Who would blame him?

David creeps forward and cuts off only the skirt of Saul's robe. And then, astonishingly, even that small act troubles his conscience: "his heart smote him." He restrains his men with a vow: "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD."

This is the moral center of the whole lesson. David will not take the throne by his own knife. He believes that the God who anointed him will also enthrone him, in God's time and by God's means. The kingdom is worth having only if it comes God's way. So David waits, and trusts, and keeps his hand clean.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- David refused to harm "the LORD's anointed," trusting God to establish him rather than seizing the throne himself (24:6).
- His men called it providence, but David discerned that opportunity is not the same as God's will.
- Even cutting the robe pricked David's conscience, showing a heart tender toward God.
- True faith waits for God's timing rather than grasping the promise by force (Psalm 27:14).
- Honoring the office and the Lord's appointment restrained David even toward a wicked king.
- Restraint here points forward to Christ, who would not seize a crown apart from the cross.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the open opportunity in the cave not the same as God's permission?
- What does it tell us that even cutting Saul's robe troubled David's conscience?
- How does waiting for God's timing protect us from gaining good things in destructive ways?

Question 5**Student Question:**

What does it mean that David “enquired of the LORD” before acting at Keilah (23:1–5, 9–12), and how does that habit contrast with Saul’s reckless self-direction?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After Saul leaves the cave, David follows and calls out to him, bowing himself with his face to the earth. He holds up the cut piece of the robe as proof: I could have killed you, and I did not. “The LORD judge between me and thee, and the LORD avenge me of thee: but mine hand shall not be upon thee.”

This is one of the clearest statements of the lesson’s great theme. David hands the whole matter over to God. He will not be his own avenger. He quotes a proverb of the ancients, “Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked,” and declares that he leaves justice in the Lord’s hands.

Centuries later, Paul would write the New Testament version of this very conviction: “Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19). David lived this principle long before it was written as a command, and it cost him something every day he chose it.

Here is the searching question for us. When we have been wronged, and we hold a piece of someone’s “robe” in our hand, some leverage, some chance to strike back, do we cut their throat or do we hand the matter to God? David shows us the harder, holier road.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- David deliberately refused personal vengeance, calling on the Lord to judge between them (24:12, 15).
- “Mine hand shall not be upon thee” is the practical shape of trusting God for justice.
- Leaving vengeance to God is not weakness but faith that He judges rightly (Romans 12:19).
- David appealed to God as the righteous Judge rather than appointing himself judge.
- Refusing revenge frees us from being consumed by the wrong done to us.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is leaving vengeance to God an act of faith rather than a sign of weakness?
- How does David’s example here anticipate the command of Romans 12:19?
- What does it cost us, practically, to put down the leverage we hold over someone who has wronged us?

Question 6

Student Question:

How consistently do you bring real decisions to God before you act, and what would change if you genuinely sought His will first?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul's response is striking and pitiable. He lifts up his voice and weeps. He calls David "my son." He admits the truth: "Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil." He even prophesies, "I know well that thou shalt surely be king."

It sounds like repentance. The words are right, the tears are real, the confession is accurate. And yet, as the very next chapters show, nothing changes. Saul returns home, and before long he is hunting David again. His tears were genuine emotion, but they were not genuine repentance.

This is one of the most sobering truths in the chapter. A person can feel deeply, weep sincerely, and say all the right words, and still not turn. Godly sorrow works repentance that leads to a changed life; the sorrow of the world only works death (2 Corinthians 7:10). Saul had the sorrow but not the turning.

Set Saul beside David, and the difference is not in their words but in their hearts. David, when his heart smote him over a piece of cloth, changed his action. Saul, weeping over his sin, returned to it. The frightening question is which of these patterns governs us when we are confronted with our own wrong.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul's confession was accurate and emotional, yet it produced no lasting change (24:16-22).
- Worldly sorrow can mimic repentance without ever turning the heart (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- Right words and real tears are not the same as a transformed life.
- David's tender conscience led to changed action; Saul's tears led back to old sin.
- An unrepentant heart can know the truth ("thou shalt surely be king") and still resist it.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling sorry for sin and actually repenting of it?
- Why might Saul's tears be more dangerous to him than open denial would have been?
- How can we tell, in ourselves, whether our sorrow over sin is producing real change?

Question 7

Student Question:

When David spared Saul and refused to "stretch forth mine hand against the LORD's anointed" (24:6), what conviction about God was governing his restraint?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Step back and consider the two men whole. Saul holds the throne, the army, the crown, every outward mark of success. David holds a cave, a band of misfits, and a cut piece of cloth. By every

worldly measure Saul is winning. By the only measure that matters, Saul is perishing and David is being made into a king after God's own heart.

The crisis did not create these hearts; it revealed them. Pressure squeezes a person, and what is inside comes out. Out of Saul came suspicion, rage, and finally murder. Out of David came inquiry of the Lord, restraint, and refusal of vengeance. The wilderness was a mirror.

This is why the lesson presses so personally. We tend to think the trial is the problem, that if only the pressure would let up we would be fine. But the pressure is not making us bitter or patient; it is showing which we already are, and giving God an occasion to form us further.

And note where each man fixed his eyes. Saul looked at David, obsessed with his rival. David looked at the Lord, the One who anointed him and would establish him. What we stare at shapes what we become. Saul became like the thing he feared; David became like the God he trusted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pressure reveals the heart rather than creating it; the wilderness was a mirror for both men.
- Outward success (Saul's throne) can coexist with inward ruin.
- What we fixate on shapes what we become, an enemy or the Lord.
- God uses seasons of pressure to form His servants, not merely to test them.
- The contrast warns against measuring our lives by outward standing rather than the heart.

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen pressure reveal what was already in a person's heart, including your own?
- What does it mean that we tend to become like what we fixate on?
- Why is outward success such an unreliable measure of the true condition of a life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Who is the "Lord's anointed" you find hardest to honor, a leader, an authority, a difficult person, and how does David's restraint challenge your attitude toward them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Twice now David has called Saul "the LORD's anointed," and that phrase deserves careful thought. David is not honoring Saul's character, which is by now indefensible. He is honoring the fact that God placed Saul in that office and that God, not David, has the right to remove him.

This is a hard teaching, because we live in an age quick to tear down those in authority, especially when they are unworthy of it. David shows us a deeper reverence: a respect for God's ordering that restrains our hand even when the person in power has wronged us terribly.

The New Testament carries this principle forward. Believers are taught to honor governing authorities, to pray for kings and all in authority, and to render honor where honor is due (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:17). This does not mean approving wickedness or obeying sin; it means we do not take it upon ourselves to overthrow what God has allowed to stand.

The personal application reaches into ordinary life: the difficult boss, the flawed elder, the unjust authority, the family member who has hurt us. David's restraint asks whether we will honor God's ordering and trust His justice, even when we hold the power to strike back.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring "the LORD's anointed" respects God's ordering and His sole right to remove, not the person's character (24:6).
- Scripture teaches honor and prayer for those in authority (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:17).
- Honoring authority never means approving sin or obeying what God forbids.
- Restraint toward those who wrong us trusts God to set things right.
- The principle reaches into ordinary relationships, not only kings and rulers.

Discussion Prompts

- Whom do you find it hardest to honor, and why does David's restraint challenge you there?
- How do we hold together honoring authority and never approving wickedness?
- Why does respecting God's ordering require trusting God's justice?

Question 9

Student Question:

Saul wept and confessed, "Thou art more righteous than I" (24:17), yet did not truly change; what does the contrast between Saul's heart and David's heart teach us about God's ways and the danger of an unrepentant heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now we reach the heaviest weight of the lesson. Saul confessed truly and yet did not turn. He knew David would be king and still fought against it. He wept and went home and took up the hunt again. His is a portrait of an unrepentant heart that has heard the truth so often it can recite it without bowing to it.

Scripture is unsparing about this danger. Hebrews warns of a heart that becomes hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and of failing to enter God's rest because of unbelief and an unwillingness to turn while it is still called today (Hebrews 3:12-15). Saul stands as a living warning of exactly that hardening, a slow, willful deafness to God that ends in ruin.

And it reminds us that no one is beyond falling. Saul began with humility and the Spirit of God upon him. He ended as a murderer of priests who would soon consult a medium. A person who once stood close to God can drift, resist, and finally be cut off if he refuses to repent. This is why the Christian is urged to take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12) and to hold fast unto the end (Hebrews 3:14).

But the chapter is not only warning. Beside Saul stands David, whose heart smote him over a scrap of cloth, who refused vengeance and waited on God. The same God who let Saul harden was forming David. The difference was not opportunity or circumstance but a heart willing to be tender before God. That tenderness is the thing to ask God for, the thing that keeps a life from Saul's end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- An unrepentant heart can know the truth fully and still refuse to bow to it (24:20-22).
- Hearts harden through the deceitfulness of sin and a refusal to turn while it is "today" (Hebrews 3:12-15).
- Saul's decline warns that one who once stood near God can drift and finally be cut off (1 Corinthians 10:12).
- Christians are urged to take heed lest they fall and to hold fast to the end (Hebrews 3:14).
- A tender, repentant heart, like David's, is the safeguard against Saul's tragic end.
- God's ways are just: He patiently warned Saul, who repeatedly chose his own way.

Discussion Prompts

- How does a heart grow hardened even while still able to recite the truth?
- What does Saul's long decline teach us about the danger of repeatedly refusing to repent?
- What practical habits keep our hearts tender and quick to turn, like David's?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way Jesus, who refused to seize by force what the Father would give Him in His time, is forming that same patient, vengeance-renouncing trust in you through this passage.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring it home to Christ, the true Anointed One, the greater Son of David. Jesus faced the sharpest version of David's cave temptation. In the wilderness Satan offered Him all the

kingdoms of the world by a shortcut, a crown without a cross (Matthew 4:8–10). On the mount of olives He could have called twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53). He refused every shortcut and waited for the Father’s way and the Father’s time.

When He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not, but committed Himself to Him that judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21–23). That is David’s cave restraint perfected. Jesus would not seize by force what the Father would give Him through obedient suffering, and so God highly exalted Him and gave Him the throne above every name (Philippians 2:8–11).

Now consider your own life. Where are you tempted to grab a crown without a cross, to take a good thing by your own hand because God’s timing feels too slow? Where are you holding a piece of someone’s robe, leverage to avenge yourself, that Christ is asking you to lay down? Where is bitterness inviting you to keep watch over a wrong instead of handing it to the righteous Judge?

Following Jesus through this passage means letting Him form in you a patient, vengeance-renouncing trust, a willingness to wait on God for what He has promised and to leave justice in His hands. Ask Him to give you David’s tender conscience and His own cross-shaped patience, and name the one place this week where you will practice it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus refused every shortcut to the crown, choosing the Father’s way and time (Matthew 4:8–10; 26:53).
- Christ when reviled reviled not again, perfecting David’s cave restraint (1 Peter 2:21–23).
- Because He would not seize the throne by force, God exalted Him to reign now (Philippians 2:8–11).
- Following Christ means renouncing the “crown without a cross” shortcuts in our own lives.
- Jesus is forming in His people a patient trust that leaves vengeance and timing to God.

Discussion Prompts

- How did Jesus face and overcome the very temptation David faced in the cave?
- Where in your life is Christ asking you to lay down the leverage you hold over someone?
- Name one specific way Jesus is forming patient, vengeance-renouncing trust in you through this passage.