

A Heart For God: Surviving the Cave

1 Samuel 21-24

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 29 October 2006

When I was a little kid I used to go to Boys' Brigade. We used to do lots of cool things like hiking, and canoeing and camping. For the most part it was fun. But there's one trip that will forever remain etched on the wall of my mind. It was the time we camped overnight in a cave at Whatipu, a wild and remote beach on the West Coast. I was about eight years old. It seemed like an exciting adventure. We made our way into the mouth of what proved to be an enormous dark cave. A cave filled with blood-sucking insects, cold dripping water, whimpering kids, vicious rats, and the odd inquisitive opossum. It wasn't a lot of fun for an eight year old. Nearly twenty years later, I was travelling through Turkey, searching for adventure. And I went on a guided tour through some underground caves – a subterranean city – in the middle of Cappadochia. And I realised: I hate caves. I hate the dark. I hate the cramped space. Most of all I hate the sense that I could be buried alive under tonnes of rock. What about you? Do you like caves? We're spending a few weeks studying the life of David, and we're going to look today at a time in his life when he spent a few nights in a cave. Turn to 1 Samuel 21:10 (p. 283).

A series of setbacks

I need to set the context. We've seen in the last few weeks how David was anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel, and how as a young boy David defeated Israel's most formidable enemy, Goliath. He becomes one of the most successful – and popular – officers in Saul's army. He marries Saul's daughter, becomes best friends with his son. And for a while it seems that everything he touches turns to gold. The throne – which God has promised him – seems almost within reach. But then David suffers a series of setbacks. Listen to this. First he loses his job because Saul becomes pathologically jealous of David and drives him out of the palace, out of the army. Next David loses his wife, Michal, because Saul sends soldiers to kill him and Michal helps him escape. So Saul takes his daughter back and gives her in marriage to someone else. David runs to a town called Ramah, where Samuel, his mentor lives. Samuel is the one who anointed him, who believes in him. But when Saul hears where David has gone he sends soldiers after him, and David has to make another escape. Samuel is an old man, too old to go with him. In fact, Samuel dies soon afterwards. So David loses his mentor. Next David runs to his best friend Jonathan, Saul's son. If anyone will give him refuge it's Jonathan. But Jonathan can't or won't leave his father's court, so David is parted from him too. He loses his job, his family, his mentor, his best friend. He's lost everything. We pick the story up in 1 Samuel 21:10. "That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath." Anyone remember who came from Gath? A really big bloke called Goliath. David has no place to go but the Philistines – his mortal enemies. And look at what happens:

11 But the servants of Achish said to him, "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?'"

12 David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. 13 So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.

14 Achish said to his servants, "Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? 15 Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?"

22:1 David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam.

The cave of discouragement

God has promised David the throne. David is expecting a palace. And he ends up in a cave. He spends the next ten years of his life – his entire twenties – in caves, in the wilderness, as a fugitive, on the run from Saul. Now it turns out that these cave years – these times of discouragement – are absolutely crucial in his development and preparation to be king – the cave is where God does some of his best work – but from a human perspective it looks to David like God's promises for him are never going to come true. It feels like God has abandoned him. Do you ever feel like that? Have you ever been in the cave of discouragement? Maybe you're in that cave right now. Maybe you've been unfairly attacked or accused. Maybe you've lost a job or you're under financial pressure. Maybe your dream of a family has been shattered: You've lost a spouse through desertion or death. Maybe you've lost a good friend. Maybe someone you love has lost their health. Maybe you're just feeling exhausted and alone. Maybe it looks like the deepest longing of your heart will never see the light of day. For whatever reason, this morning you're in the cave. If you're not right now in the cave, you will

be. Sooner or later everybody spends some time in the cave. The question is: How do you survive the cave? What does David do? What cave survival techniques can we learn from David?

Survival tip no. 1: don't get isolated

The first thing to notice about David in this cave is that he's not alone. Some people come to form a little community – or congregation – around him: "All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him" (22:2). Not exactly what you'd call the cream of the crop of Israelite society. They're a motley bunch of misfits. Needy, whinging misfits. Like you lot. And me. The kind of people you typically find in a church. Sinners. David spends the next ten years of his life scrambling through the wilderness, living in caves, with these men. There are others, too. In v 5 it says that the prophet Gad was with David, giving him directions. Then in v20 it says the priest, Abiathar, joins David little community. Then in chapter 23:14 you read this:

14 David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, *but God did not give David into his hands.*

15 While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. 16 And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh *and helped him find strength in God.* 17 "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this."

So in the cave, David is not alone. He has people who strengthen him, and encourage him to keep trusting God. That's the **first** cave survival technique we read in this story: Don't get isolated. You can't survive in the wilderness on your own. We need each other. It's interesting. A remarkable thing happened to this ragtag band of misfits. After years of living together, struggling together, praying together, they're no longer described as sad and grumpy. They've become what are referred to as "David's mighty men." Look at 2 Samuel 23 (p.319). It lists how these men had become fearless warriors. In v 20, for example, there's mention of a guy called Benaiah who performed great exploits:

He struck down two of Moab's best men. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. 21 And he struck down a huge Egyptian. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear.

Question. Where do you think men like Benaiah got the inspiration to take on the Philistines and lions and giants? From David. From being together with him in the cave. God does some of his best work in caves, if we're part of a community. That's what Lorraine and I have experienced here over the last five and a half years. There have been times when we've found ourselves in the cave – bruised by criticism, or discouraged by mistakes – and every time we've been strengthened and renewed by many of you. I read this week that psychologists and counsellors are speaking increasingly these days of what is known as "lonely man syndrome" – men who used to have a wide circle of friends with whom they had substantial contact, and from whom they received significant support, but who now experience very little in the way of genuine community. They're in the cave alone. Let me ask you a question. How many people in this community know you well enough to help you find strength in God when you're in the cave? Why not after this service invite someone home for lunch today. Or next Sunday? Because when you find yourself in the cave, you need a community.

Survival tip no. 2: avoid short-cuts

That's what David has. Look at 23:24: "Now David and his men were in the desert of Maon, in the Arabah south of Jeshimon." They're being forced by Saul's deadly game of hide-and-seek into the most remote parts of the southern deserts of Judah.

25 Saul and his men began the search, and when David was told about it, he went down to the rock and stayed in the Desert of Maon. When Saul heard this, he went into the Desert of Maon in pursuit of David.

26 Saul was going along one side of the mountain, and David and his men were on the other side, hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his forces were closing in on David and his men to capture them, 27 a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Come quickly! The Philistines are raiding the land." 28 Then Saul broke off his pursuit of David and went to meet the Philistines. ... 29 And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi.

I've actually been to En Gedi. It's a pleasant little oasis on the western shores of the Dead Sea. But about a hundred metres from the waters' edge rugged limestone cliffs, fractured by canyons and caves, rise up to create the perfect hiding place for David and his men to take refuge. Chapter 24:

1 After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." 2 So Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats.

3 He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave.

The writer is telling us more about Saul than we really wanted to know, but the point is that Saul is completely vulnerable at this point. He's at David's mercy. And David's men say (v 4): "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" In other words, "Here's your chance. God has given you a way out of this cave. Just kill Saul. And you'll be free. You'll be king." It would have been tempting to take this short-cut. But it would have been wrong. For David to take matters into his own hands like this – not trusting God, but striking Saul in fear and anger – would have meant becoming just like the man from whom he is running. If you're familiar with the *Star Wars* trilogy, it would have been like the young Jedi knight, Anakin Skywalker, morphing into Darth Vader. Giving in to the dark side, giving in to this dark temptation to murder his enemy, would have destroyed David's soul. So I guess this exposes a **second** cave survival strategy: avoid short-cuts.

Let me speak seriously here. Some of you are in a cave today. You're in a discouraging place for whatever reason, and you are faced with the temptation to take a short-cut, to get out of the cave as quick as you can. Maybe you've been mistreated by someone and the temptation is to strike back or withdraw completely because you "shouldn't have to put up with this kind of behaviour." But it would be a short-cut. It wouldn't be God's will for your life, and you know it. Maybe you're lonely and there's a relationship that promises intimacy and it's tempting to think, "This is available and it would feel so good. God wants me to be happy." You can rationalise it, but it would be wrong. Maybe the temptation is just to quit something when you know God is calling you to endure, but it would feel so good to leave the cave. God says, "Don't take the short-cut. A shortcut like that will destroy your soul. Stay where you are. And trust me."

Survival tip no. 3: discuss your discouragement with God

David does. Turn with me to Psalm 142 (p.611). Some of the psalms have a little description in fine print at the beginning. You'll see that this one says, "A *maskil* of David. When he was in the cave." So this psalm expresses the cry of David's heart when he was living in the cave. He says:

1 I cry aloud to the LORD;
I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.
2 I pour out my complaint before him;
before him I tell my trouble.

A quick show of hands. How many of you can complain. Anybody here? How many of you have discovered that complaining is in fact your spiritual gift? We can all complain. We could all do this. Now it's interesting. Old Testament scholars tell us that there are different kinds of psalms. There are thanksgiving psalms. There are enthronement psalms. There are wisdom psalms. But the single-most common form of psalm is what is known as the psalm of lament: people complaining to God. The Bible encourages us to do it. This is what David does in the cave. And this is the **third** cave survival tip: discuss your discouragement with God. Most of us don't. We bury our discouragement down deep inside. We pretend to be okay. Force a few smiles. But that doesn't solve anything. By never facing and owning our pain, we never learn from it. Never let God speak to us, and heal us. Why not do an experiment this week. When you wake up one morning, take a few moments and rate yourself 1 out of 10 on the discouragement scale. Ask yourself, "How discouraged am I today?" And then talk to God about it. That's what David did. And look at what happened. In v 5 of this Psalm he says:

5 I cry to you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living."

David learns that when you're in a dark cave, and you turn to God, the cave is a perfectly safe place to be, because God is there with you. I was talking to Pearl and Alan Smith this week. Pearl's not been well after her last cycle of chemotherapy. It's been hard. Really hard. But you know what she said? She and Alan read the Bible and a daily devotional every day. Pearl said to me, "It's amazing. As we've done our readings, it's like God has been speaking directly to us. I don't know how people can manage – in this kind of cave – without God."

Some of you are in the cave today. You're discouraged. Others of you aren't in that place, but you will be one day. Just remember: don't get isolated. Avoid the temptation to take short-cuts. And discuss your discouragement with God. And you'll discover, like David, that God is with you. Because he knows all about caves. He's been there. Jesus suffered like us. The Son of David had everything stripped from him. He lost his position as a teacher. His friends abandoned him. The crowds turned on him. His enemies threatened him. And ultimately he went to a cross and died. And they put his body in a cave. They thought he was finished. But caves are where God resurrects dead lives. I don't know what your cave is today. But I do know this. God does some of his best work in caves.

Questions

1. Read Matthew 4:1-11. Think of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, and the forty years that Moses spent in the wilderness. What was the result of their time spent in the wilderness?
2. Read 1 Kings 19:1-13. Elijah is in a cave, discouraged, and God says to him, "What are you doing here?" What can we learn about discouragement from this story?
3. Read the description of David's cave community in 1 Samuel 22:2. Compare this with Mark 2:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. What kinds of people formed the community around Jesus and Paul? What does this say about the types of people we should expect to find in the church? How do your expectations need to be realigned?
4. Do you have a team of people who know you well enough to stand with you when you must spend time in the cave?
5. Read 1 Samuel 24:1-7. Can you think of a short-cut you've been tempted to take in order to get out of the cave?
6. Psalm 57 expresses David's heart when he "he had fled from Saul into the cave." Why not read it and make it your prayer this week.