

## Life Among the Philistines

February 5, 2017

I Samuel 27:1-7; 30:1-10, Philippians 4:10-13

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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When I was in high school, I looked up to a man who constantly belittled my friends who were not from the church. If I were to miss a church event in order to, say, attend a concert, he would invariably say something like, “So, the children of Israel are out consorting with the Philistines again, eh?”

For a long time, I thought he was just hopelessly behind the times. “Philistines? I never heard of those guys. No, I’m going to hear Blood, Sweat, and Tears.”



Philistia is the ancient name for a narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Judean foothills. Today, we know that geography better by the Hebrew name, *pelesheth*, or Palestine. In modern usage, to call someone a Philistine is to imply that he is crude or unrefined and perhaps somewhat oafish – like the giant Goliath, perhaps. The Philistines that we meet in scripture are a group of people who descended from emigrants from one of the Mediterranean islands. They are known primarily for three things: 1) they are called “sea people” and are renowned as sailors; 2) they mastered the use of iron well before the nations around them, and the Israelites were forced to depend on Philistines for help sharpening their tools and weapons; and 3) they produced and consumed an amazing amount of beer. Although we sometimes hear the word as a disparagement, the reality is that in many ways, the Philistines were technically advanced in comparison to the Hebrews and the other cultures around them.

They were, however, the sworn enemies of Israel. In fact,

for all of David's life, the Philistines had been making things miserable for the Jews as they conducted raid after raid into Hebrew territory. In David's time, any Israelite in his or her right mind sought to avoid the Philistines like the plague.

But there came a time, as you just heard, when David actually sought out the Philistines. Sick to death of the unjust



"Men of David"  
By James Tissot (1836-1902)

persecution he was receiving from the hand of King Saul, David sneaks across the border into Philistia and applies for refugee status. He and his band of about 600 soldiers, along with their families, approach king Achish with a deal:

"Look, your majesty," David says, "we've been providing protection for folks in this area for a long time. We can help you out, too. You hate Saul; Saul hates me; why can't we be friends? Can this be a win-win situation?"

Achish says "yes" and in fact gives David his own town, Ziklag, to use as a home base. For the next year and a half, David functions as a sort of double agent. He keeps assuring Achish that he is attacking Saul's troops and positions within Israel, but in reality, he and his men are destroying communities that belong to the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. They are enriching themselves, raising their esteem among the Israelites in the border areas, and managing to avoid the armies of King Saul.

Now, listen to me: there is nothing savory or redemptive about this period of David's life. He and his men are essentially free-lance mercenary soldiers on seek and destroy missions. David is acting as what scholar Walter Brueggemann describes as a "con man of the first order". He is ruthless and cunning and calculating and cruel.

And it may be that David would say that he had no choice; if he hadn't been being pursued by the maniacal king of Israel, he'd have been able to stay home and tend sheep. By all

appearances, every single choice open to David at this juncture of the story is a bad choice. And so he lives on the edge for a while...

...Until things went south in a hurry. David has made such an impression on Achish that the Philistine King announces to David that he and his men will be needed to take part in a surprise attack on King Saul and the Israeli army. David is in a jam, because he's depending on Achish's good will to preserve his life and property in Ziklag, but he's sworn an oath not to lift a hand against King Saul. The apparent solution comes from an unexpected source: the other Philistine generals refuse to fight if David's in the mix. They say that David is too faithful to Saul and to the Israelites; he can't be trusted to work towards their defeat. David and his men return to Ziklag, thinking that they've dodged another bullet, but discover that something horrible has happened. Listen:

*David and his men reached Ziklag on the third day. Now the Amalekites had raided the Negev and Ziklag. They had attacked Ziklag and burned it, and had taken captive the women and everyone else in it, both young and old. They killed none of them, but carried them off as they went on their way.*

*When David and his men reached Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. David's two wives had been captured—Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one*

*was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters.  
But David found strength in the Lord his God.*

*Then David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelek, "Bring me the ephod." Abiathar brought it to him, and David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?"*

*"Pursue them," he answered. "You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue."*

*David and the six hundred men with him came to the Besor Valley, where some stayed behind. Two hundred of them were too exhausted to cross the valley, but David and the other four hundred continued the pursuit.*



Things go from bad to worse for David in a hurry. He's being hunted like a dog in his own country, so he crosses into enemy territory. He spends months earning the trust of his Philistine boss, knowing that at any time he could be discovered as a fraud and killed. He comes home from the day he almost had to choose between attacking his own countrymen or revealing the lie he's been living for the past year, and when he makes it home, he discovers that everyone he loves has been kidnapped and his home is destroyed. If that's not bad enough, his own men are finally angry enough at him that they'd like to knock his block off and some of them are talking about stoning David to death.

Have you ever had days like that?

Not only is nothing going right, but everything is going wrong. There are no good choices, and even the bad ones seem to be really, really bad. You've been trying your best, but

everything you touch seems to turn to ash immediately. More than anything, you just want to go and pound on something or someone, but you have to be careful where to go because there is a growing line of people who are apparently eager to pound on *you*. Your only choices seem to be crash or burn. You don't even have the strength to cry any more.

I know you've had days like that; some of you have had weeks, months, or even years like that.

What do you do?

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Slide

You may have noticed that our scripture readings for today skipped a few chapters of I Samuel. I did that because we're primarily following David, but it might be helpful to note that I Samuel 28 records a day when King Saul was feeling that way. He was so down that in clear violation of Jewish law, he went to talk to a witch about his problems. The fact that the ruling king of Israel felt the need to do this reveals his isolation, fear, frustration, and spiritual bankruptcy at what's going on in his life and his kingdom. To make matters worse, the witch informs him that not only is he going to die, but the dreaded Philistines are going to defeat the Israelite army. At the end of that episode, the once-proud, formerly gifted, powerful King Saul is left cringing and crying in the arms of this sorceress. In other words, Saul is simply unable to do anything that will reverse his fortune.

As he views the devastation of Ziklag, considers the abduction of his family, and comes face-to-face with his failure to live with integrity, David must feel the same way. Nothing has gone right.

And yet, somehow, David makes a different choice than did Saul. The best words in this part of the story come from David's lips as he cries out, "Bring me the ephod!"

Do you remember back in chapters 21 and 22, when David went to get some help from the priests at the temple in

Nob, and Saul was so irritated at the men of God for helping David that he wiped out 85 priests in a single day? There was only one man from a priestly family who escaped that day – a young man named Abiathar who fled to David for protection and came to serve as his spiritual mentor and advisor. And he brought along the ephod – the prayer tool used by the priests.

In his time of deep anguish, confusion, anger, and pain, David now says something that he hasn't said in months: "Bring me the ephod!"

Whereas Saul, on the darkest of days, turned to a witch and sought answers in the powers of sorcery and evil, David sought the wisdom and strength of God even when he had no right to think it would accomplish anything.

Could David have turned to prayer sooner? Should he have? Where had Abiathar been for the past sixteen months? Was part of the problem that David was too in love with his perception of himself as a swashbuckling renegade? Was he so fascinated with his identity as a double-agent, or overconfident in his ability to strong-arm or sweet-talk his way through any problem?

Probably.

Could David have done things differently in the days leading up to this, the worst of them?

Of course he could have. But on all of those days, he didn't call on God.

Today, he does.

When he is pressed between the armies of Saul on one side and Achish on the other while looking at the devastation of the Amalekites all around him, David sought to keep himself together by calling on the name of the Lord.

What will you do in the midst of your toughest trial? When

you are squeezed flatter than a dime, beaten up, worn down, and pushed around... what will you do?

You can join with David and cry for the ephod. You can look to God for guidance and presence.

And I suspect that some of you now may be remembering that there was a New Testament verse read this morning, and you might think that this is where Pastor Dave pulls the golden cord and Philippians 4:13 comes raining down on our heads.

Having a tough day? Has your best friend's dad tried to kill you, your boss threaten you, and your neighbors come in and kidnap your family while destroying your house? Just remember, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me..."

Have you heard that verse before? Have you ever thought, "What a load of hooey?"

I'm here to tell you that the way many Christians interpret it, it *is* a load of hooey.

Celebrity megapastor Joel Osteen, for instance, wrote this in his online devotional:

When was the last time you declared "I can" out loud? It's not something people think to do every day. In fact, most people tend to magnify their limitations. They focus on their shortcomings. But scripture makes it plain: all things are possible to those who believe. That's right! It is possible to see your dreams fulfilled. It is possible to overcome that obstacle. It is possible to climb to new heights. It is possible to embrace your destiny. You may not know how it will all take place. You may not have a plan, but all you have to know is that if God said you can...you can!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Today's Word With Joel Osteen", 1/21/2013 <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2980275/posts>

Star athletes show up for games with this verse emblazoned on their bodies or uniforms...as if chanting this phrase will stop the interception or get me the game ball... as if that's the most important thing...

Do you think that's what Paul's getting at here? Do you think that it didn't occur to David to just "name it and claim it" and grasp the victory and go home as king?

Paul didn't write this note to the church in Philippi in order to motivate them to go out and beat the world; no, he wrote these words about finding contentment and hope in any situation so that they could have the courage to continue to walk through the tough places while the world was beating on them.

I'm not here to tell you that you are any different than David or Paul; you *will* face tough times, you *will* encounter difficult decisions, and some days the only choices you have will be horrible ones. You *will* sense pain, or isolation, or frustration. That is not optional – it is the existence that we have been given in this, our life among the Philistines.

But which direction will that pain, isolation, or frustration send you? How will you respond to it?

Thank God for the ephod. Thank God for the encouragement and hope we can find when surrounded by even the most hideous of circumstances. Thank God that the story is not finished yet. Thank God that God has not left us, and promises not to leave us where we are now. Amen.