

**Opening Scripture:** Psalm 23

**Introduction:** Lincoln's Second Inaugural Speech, delivered near the close of the Civil War, addressed a deeply fractured and exhausted nation. In the phrase, "With malice toward none, with charity for all," he urged forgiveness and unity. He laid out a vision for a future where Americans could begin to heal regardless of wartime allegiances or grievances. Two years earlier, he declared, "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Eloquent words, now in post-war time, beginning to take shape in his policies.

- He insisted on amnesty for Confederates who took an oath a pledge of allegiance to the Union.
- He proposed the "10 percent plan" so that Southern states could rejoin the Union once 10% of its registered voters pledged their loyalty, acknowledging the end of slavery.
- He advocated for Self-Governance: He wanted southern states to begin governing themselves as soon as possible. He opposed the radicals in his own party and administration who proposed occupation of the South. He officially denounced "Carpet Baggers"—political and financial adventurers from the North who took advantage of the reconstruction era in order to weasel into places of governance and power.
- He set forth a vision for the Education of Freedmen: He championed the education of formerly enslaved people and pushed for the immediate voting rights of African Americans.

***Lincoln chose the path less traveled: mercy and leniency.***

He understood the principle that things don't change for the better—a family, a relationship, a business, a church, a nation, or a life—by sidestepping the hard stuff. The path of expedience, taking the shortcut, avoiding all discomfort, dodging uncertainty, or ducking responsibility—choosing to wrap ourselves in the warmth of the familiar—never venturing out of our comfort zone, which is by definition an anxiety-free space where we are never challenged and we never grow—that path never leads to needed change. ***Only as we embrace that which is most difficult can we truly experience something extraordinary.***

**[Transition]: 1 Samuel Chapter 24:** Like Lincoln, David chooses mercy rather than vengeance. His action of mercy is so undeniable that it seems to even melt the heart of a calloused tyrant. And avoid unneeded bloodshed. All because he shows his sworn and hardened enemy uncommon and unexpected mercy.

Let's pick up the story in verse 1.

When Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the wilderness near En-Gedi." <sup>2</sup> So Saul took three thousand of Israel's fit young men and went to look for David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. <sup>3</sup> When Saul came to the sheep pens along the road, a cave was there, and he went in to relieve himself. David and his men were staying in

the recesses of the cave, <sup>4</sup> so they said to him, “Look, this is the day the LORD told you about: ‘I will hand your enemy over to you so you can do to him whatever you desire.’” Then David got up and secretly cut off the corner of Saul’s robe.

On word that his perceived rival is hiding in the southern country of En-Gedi, Saul leads 3,000-foot soldiers on a hunt through the craggy terrain, their eyes scanning the desolate and forbidding cliffs for signs of David and his men.

**Ein Gedi is a nature reserve located in the Judean desert along the western shore of the Dead Sea today.** There are tufts of vegetation around, depending on what time of year you go there, and more importantly, an unbelievable freshwater spring. Just the hike from the tour bus up, about a couple of football fields in length, to the spring, and you feel like you’ll die in the desert heat.

**And there are natural caves everywhere—all around.** This is close to where the Dead Sea scrolls were found in caves. So, Saul has taken refuge in the cave, to answer nature’s call, and also to escape the punishing heat. He immediately disrobes and relieves himself—and the text indicates that he is there for a respite from the punishing heat.

**Now, it just happens to be the cave where David and his men also take refuge from the heat.** Upon seeing their sworn enemy cornered, David’s soldiers naturally assume that God is handing Saul over at this moment. They urge David to strike him dead, but David instead sheers off a corner of his royal robe.

<sup>5</sup> Afterward, David’s conscience bothered him because he had cut off the corner of Saul’s robe. <sup>6</sup> He said to his men, “As the Lord is my witness, I would never do such a thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed. I will never lift my hand against him, since he is the Lord’s anointed.” <sup>7</sup> With these words David persuaded his men, and he did not let them rise up against Saul.

**David’s sense of honor for the office of King is greater than his need for deliverance from Saul.** He has to persuade his soldiers not to harm the king but to let him leave on his own two feet. David’s conscience is pierced through. The Hebrew text says, “And David’s conscience attacked him.” He didn’t take advantage of the situation—though he could have. He didn’t strike his pursuer in his most vulnerable moment. He doesn’t capitalize on the opportunity to his advantage. What does he do—he takes a token that proves he had Saul dead to rights.

- In a day when people choose *dishonor*, David encourages us toward *honorable action*.
- In a day when people choose the *expedient path*, David models *patience and long suffering*.
- In a day when men are swayed by the masses, telling us that *this must be good, this must be God’s will*—David shows us how to listen to God speaking in and through our conscience. And he will not violate his conscience.

Verse 7: Then Saul left the cave and went on his way. <sup>8</sup> After that, David got up, went out of the cave, and called to Saul, “My lord the king!” When Saul looked behind him, David knelt low with his face to the ground and paid homage. <sup>9</sup> David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of people who say, ‘Look, David intends to harm you?’ <sup>10</sup> You can see with your own eyes that

the Lord handed you over to me today in the cave. Someone advised me to kill you, but I took pity on you and said: I won't lift my hand against my lord, since he is the Lord's anointed. <sup>11</sup> Look, my father! Look at the corner of your robe in my hand, for I cut it off, but I didn't kill you. Recognize that I've committed no crime or rebellion. I haven't sinned against you even though you are hunting me down to take my life. <sup>12</sup> "May the Lord judge between me and you, and may the Lord take vengeance on you for me, but my hand will never be against you. <sup>13</sup> As the old proverb says, 'Wickedness comes from wicked people.' My hand will never be against you. <sup>14</sup> Who has the king of Israel come after? What are you chasing after? A dead dog? A single flea? <sup>15</sup> May the Lord be judge and decide between you and me. May he take notice and plead my case and deliver me from you." In this brilliant, emotional speech, David appeals to 6 things.

**David appeals to honor:** Calling Saul "My lord the king!" and bowing prostrate before him—David shows honor even though it has not been earned, it is not deserved. He honors the man because he honors the office.

**David also appeals to logic:** He confronts the falsehoods among Saul's advisors, who've reinforced his belief that David wants to kill him and take his place. If that were true, David says, then why would I let you live?

**David appeals to Saul's conscience:** He targets whatever kernel of morality that still dwells in him. He says, "Think of how unjust and immoral it is for you to pursue me when I have no ill intentions toward you."

**David appeals to Saul's emotions** by saying, "Look, my father!" This is a warm and affectionate way of addressing him as a father figure—a fatherly mentor.

**David appeals to his own innocence:** "I haven't sinned against you—and I would never. I could have just as easily cut your throat as I did your coat."

**David appeals to God—as judge and savior:** "May the Lord judge between me and you, and may the LORD take vengeance on you for me—but I will not presume to stand in the place of God and be your judge." But this is precisely what Saul is doing to him—playing God, taking his vengeance out on the innocent and the Lord's anointed King. **He declares,** "May the Lord be judge between us, and may he deliver me from you." David trusts in the Lord to deliver him from the hand of Saul, and to judge Saul for his sins. David will not be that instrument.

And it works. David's speech moves Saul to an emotional and touching response...

<sup>16</sup> When David finished saying these things to him, Saul replied, "Is that your voice, David my son?" Then Saul wept aloud <sup>17</sup> and said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have done what is good to me though I have done what is evil to you.

<sup>18</sup> You yourself have told me today what good you did for me: when the Lord handed me over to you, you didn't kill me. <sup>19</sup> When a man finds his enemy, does he let him go unharmed? May the Lord repay you with good for what you've done for me today.

<sup>20</sup> “Now I know for certain you will be king, and the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand. <sup>21</sup> Therefore swear to me by the Lord that you will not cut off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family.” <sup>22</sup> So David swore to Saul. Then Saul went back home, and David and his men went up to the stronghold.

The story ends with this strange moment where it seems like the old Saul—before a lifetime of disobedience to God, before the torments of evil spirits, before flirting with Pagan idolatry and his murder of priests and his relentless pursuit of the innocent—a glimpse of the man who once was. A momentary glance into the man he could have been.

Imagine for a moment if Saul had said these words back in Chapter 18. Before this nightmare, this pointless pursuit of David which was based on the false belief that David wished him harm. The story teaches us at least one clear principle of the Christian life...

**Principle: David demonstrates the power of mercy over retribution.** Though vengeance was the norm in the ancient world, he chose compassion despite having the upper hand. This decision wasn’t a weakness but a strength of character, defying all the brutal norms of his time.

**Compassion and mercy for sinners are inherent to Jewish religion. Exodus 25:17–22:** “Make a mercy seat of pure gold...” God told Moses it would be 45 inches long and 27 inches wide. Craft two hammered gold cherubim at each end of the mercy seat, with wings spread above, facing each other. Place the mercy seat on the ark, and I will meet with you there, speaking about the Israelites’ commandments from between the cherubim over the ark. The mercy seat was the lid of the ark where the High Priest entered every year to sprinkle the blood of the animal sacrifice onto it, symbolically covering Israel’s sins. *The mercy seat signaled that God had provided for the temporary reconciliation of the people with Himself.*

**Jesus is the incarnation of God’s mercy for sinners.** Look at **Romans 3:23–26** “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup> they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented ***him as the mercy seat by his blood***, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. <sup>26</sup> God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.” Who has the righteousness we need? Jesus demonstrates God’s righteousness in his sinless life and vicarious death. How can God be a just judge if he acquits the guilty? Because the guilty deserve what they’re getting don’t they?

**This is why David could sing in Psalm 23:6,** “Surely goodness and mercy ***shall follow me*** all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Why would goodness and mercy ***follow*** David? Because that’s what he left behind. Instead of a trail of wrecked lives and injustices, David leaves behind (generally speaking) a life of goodness and showing mercy and God’s kindness to others. ***Whatever you’ve left behind, that’s what will follow you.***

You know, David pledges to Saul to never forget or forsake his family, and later on, when he comes into his Kingdom, he will make good on that promise. How easy it would have been for him to be given over to the same jealousy and envy and seek to destroy all of Saul's family. But he doesn't. He shows them the compassion he promises in this text. That's David. (Now, in the following story, Abigail will have to save him from becoming Saul, but we'll cover that next week).

**Illustration: This week, I reflected on the instances where blind beggars, parents of demon-possessed individuals, and the Canaanite woman** who exemplified outsiders excluded from the promises, covenants, and inheritance of Israel (the resurrection) when people asked *explicitly for mercy*. It struck me that in these moments, they cry out, "Son of David, have mercy on me..."

*I was struck by the fact that when people cry out to Jesus for mercy they normally referred to him as David's Son.*

**Ephesians 2:3–5** "We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. <sup>4</sup>But **God, who is rich in mercy**, because of his great love that he had for us, <sup>5</sup>made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. **You are saved by grace!**" What does it mean to be saved by Grace (v.6, 8)? It means that sinners who lived for the desires of the flesh, who were by nature children of wrath, have received God's mercy—the God who richly offers forgiveness because he loved us—it means to be raised to life from spiritual and social death.

**Titus 3:4–6** "But when the **kindness of God** our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, **but according to his mercy**—through the washing of **regeneration** and **renewal by the Holy Spirit**. <sup>6</sup>He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior." *Dead in our sins, we desperately need resurrection life. Guilty, we badly need clemency. God grants both, not to those who merit them, but according to His boundless compassion.* And instead of becoming our judge, he becomes our hope, our life, our Father.

**This is why Jesus commands us to "be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful."** This is the mark of Jesus' followers. We never look more like Jesus than when we show each other mercy and compassion.

**Illustration: Imagine for a second what it would actually take for Gaza and Israel to live in peace.** The hardest thing for Hamas to do was not to spend all their foreign aid on constructing a labyrinth of terror tunnels and manufacturing rockets to terrorize Israeli neighborhoods for 20 years. I'm sure that took back-breaking effort. But it's not the hardest thing they could do.

**The hardest thing to do for Israel** is not to send its sons and daughters to go house-to-house to root out terrorists so as to avoid civilian casualties—that *is hard, it's enormously difficult* when they have the might to level the place overnight—turn it into a parking lot. But they've chosen the more difficult path. But *that's not the most challenging thing to do*.

**The most difficult thing for both sides is forgiving past grievances. To show each other mercy, compassion, and kindness.** That choice seems unimaginable. It seems impossible. Both sides demand vengeance for their grievances.

**Let me ask:** *Is there anyone in your life who needs forgiveness rather than judgment or harshness right now?*

Is there someone in your world who needs patience, sympathy, and understanding, or to be led to the truth by someone quick to listen and slow to speak?

Is there someone in your life who may deserve judgment or condemnation—but who could be converted by your acts of kindness? That's what David does for Saul—after a great speech—Saul appears to come to his senses and abandon (for now) this pointless pursuit of David.

What would it take for us to adopt this mindset? Should we take the disposition of mercy and compassion rather than lean into the easy instincts of retribution and payback?

1. To *be like* Jesus, we must *believe* in Jesus. Listen, right behavior follows the right belief.

**Illustration My 10-year-old minivan, with barely 100,000 miles, surprised me when it started spewing oil and coolant, which I could see** all over my driveway. I took it to my mechanic, who informed me that the oil filter housing and cooler (that Chrysler made of plastic) had melted and needed immediate repair. He removed the upper intake, cleaned it up, drained the fluids, and replaced the part—now it runs like new. ***Proper operation is the result of a well-built and maintained engine.*** Right behavior is the result of renewed heart.

If you're an unbeliever here and this message pierces your heart—and you know you need to respond with forgiveness and pity on those who've wronged you—then you are saying you want to be like Jesus. And you can't be like Jesus until you believe in Jesus. Paul said to the **Romans** in less letter, chapter **10:9**, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Jesus said in John 3:16, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who **believes in him** will not perish but have **eternal life.**" He said, "This is eternal life—to know the only true God, and the one he sent—Jesus the Messiah."

2. If we believe in Jesus, we must follow his teachings. Jesus' call to discipleship was not only a call to accept but an invitation to follow him—meaning to follow his teachings and way of life. ***What does it mean to follow Jesus—we believe what he said, do what he said, and follow the cruciform pattern of his life.*** Jesus said in **Luke 9:23**, “Then he said to them all, ‘If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and *follow me.*’” Paul said, “Let this mindset be in you that was in Christ Jesus...who even though He was in very nature God, who did not have to ascend or acquire divinity—he already was God from eternity past—but instead emptied himself into the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of a human being (whom he created by the way), humbling himself to the point of death on a cross.” Let me ask you, what is your mindset today? Have the teachings and pattern of Jesus' life so affected how you think that you find yourself beginning to live them out habitually?