

BLESSING BACKWARD

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King Saul's was the sad case of a career gone south due to his persistent refusal to obey God. Such colossal failure caused the Lord to tear the kingdom from Saul, giving it to a man more worthy (1 Sam. 13:14). The next king would be David, freshly pulled from the sheep pasture, but transitioning from Saul to his unwelcome successor took a long time, during which Saul did his utmost to track down and annihilate the young shepherd.

Jealousy had surfaced when David was given higher praise than Saul among the women singers (1 Sam. 18:6ff.). Saul feared David's popularity and tried, surreptitiously, to get him killed by the Philistines (1 Sam. 18:25). That failing, Saul went for the direct approach by hurling his spear, in effort to "pin David to the wall" (1 Sam. 19:10). Then he thought to murder David in his own bed (1 Sam. 19:11ff.). Nothing worked. Perhaps the pinnacle of Saul's perversity was reached when he executed eighty-five priests at Nob because Ahimelech, a priest there, had given aid to David (1 Sam. 21-22).

If ever a man had things backward, it was Saul. His skewed perspective is displayed when, learning David was in Keilah, Saul says, "God has given him into my hand" (1 Sam. 23:7). Saul seemed to think God was on his side, when reality was quite the opposite.

As the pursuit continued, David went to Ziph, when, of all things, the Ziphites contacted Saul and offered to turn David in to the bloodthirsty king (1 Sam. 23:15ff.). Saul was elated, and said to the Ziphites, "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me" (1 Sam. 23:21).

The chase will continue, but let us pull in the reins as we ponder verse 21 -- a statement of thick irony from a man of thin conviction. When the Ziphites offered to hand David over, Saul said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me." Think of it. God had already disowned Saul and told him his reign was over (1 Sam. 15:23, 28). Saul was rebellious, wretched, rejected. David was chosen by God to succeed Saul, and Saul wanted David dead. David was being helped by God, while Saul was multiplying his own mistakes. In spite of it all, Saul still thought he could tell the Ziphites, "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me." In truth, Saul was not enjoying the Lord's favor, and he really had no right to speak as though he and God were on the same page. His blessing of the Ziphites was as backward as could be.

Which brings us a sober reminder. Not everyone who says "God bless you" is on God's side. Not all who talk about the Lord in a pleasing way are actually pleasing the Lord. Talk is cheap if your sins are costing your soul. Look at Saul. Look at the oceans of churches out there, teeming with schools of conflicting theology. Denominational differences form a palette of clashing colors to paint a portrait of Christianity scarcely resembling anything in the gospel. Yet, every such church thinks itself on God's side, thus combining a legacy of rebellion with the language of righteousness. God does not intend that we ask his blessing while avoiding his Book. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Yet, that is precisely where we can learn a lesson from Moses. Remember, the same act can be obedience one time, but rebellion the next. God told Israel he tested them to see whether or not they would actually keep his commandments. And remember, historic divine precedent

does not necessarily establish present divine approval. The Old Testament has many elements which, were they brought into the church's worship, would be sinful. If these are not legitimate lessons taught by what Moses did, then, pray tell, what can we possibly learn from the accounts (don't forget Romans 15:4)?

Moses followed a God-given precedent at Kadesh when he struck the rock. The problem was, the old precedent from Rephidim (strike the rock) had been superceded by new instruction at Kadesh (speak to the rock). Failure to comply with the new made Moses--on that occasion--an unbelieving rebel. Question: What does it make Christians who refuse to abide solely by New Testament instruction? While the gospel of Christ does not tell us to worship by playing on any manmade musical instruments, it does tell us to speak to each other in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). Ponder that point. When he failed to simply speak to the rock, Moses was in rebellion. Perhaps many in Moses' day would have considered it a non-issue whether Moses struck or spoke to a rock. Doubtless many today consider a piano in worship a non-issue. But the tenor of Scripture indicates otherwise. Nor is the Bible shy of reminding that "our God is a consuming fire," into whose hands "it is a fearful thing to fall" (Hebrews 12:29; 10:31).