

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Samuel 23 unfolds across three interlocking episodes, each pressing the same essential question: will David survive, and by whose hand? In the first episode (vv. 1–6), David inquires of the LORD about whether to defend the besieged city of Keilah, receives divine confirmation, overcomes his men’s fearful objections by inquiring a second time, and delivers the city — only to discover in the second episode (vv. 7–13) that the same city he rescued will betray him to Saul if he remains. The chapter’s structural irony is sharp: David saves Keilah from the Philistines and Keilah would have handed David to Saul. The third episode (vv. 14–29) narrates David’s extended fugitive existence in the wilderness of Ziph and Maon, bracketed by two contrasting encounters — Jonathan’s covenant-affirming visit (vv. 16–18) and the Ziphites’ treacherous intelligence to Saul (vv. 19–23). The chapter closes with Saul nearly capturing David at the rock of escape before a Philistine raid compels Saul to break off pursuit (vv. 25–29). Throughout, the chapter tracks two parallel realities: Saul’s closing pursuit and the LORD’s providential concealment of David.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through this chapter is to demonstrate that He is the sovereign guardian of His anointed — and to do so precisely through the texture of danger, betrayal, and near-failure, rather than through dramatic deliverance alone. The chapter is not primarily about David’s courage or competence; it is about the LORD’s hidden-but-active hand sustaining a man whose cause He has claimed. God intends the reader to see that covenant faithfulness is not the absence of wilderness — it is the presence of the LORD within it. The intended effect is confidence in God’s protecting faithfulness toward those He has called, even when the environment is maximally hostile and deliverance looks nothing like what was expected.

Subject Sentence:

The LORD preserves His anointed through every form of threat — military, political, and geographical — even when deliverance is invisible.

Primary Claim:

God is calling His people to trust His hidden providential hand over their lives when every visible circumstance — hostile enemies, treacherous allies, and closing danger — suggests abandonment. The God who sustained David in the wilderness of Ziph sustains His own in every wilderness they did not choose.

Interpretive Evaluation

On the nature of David's inquiries (vv. 2, 4, 9–12): Some readers flatten these inquiries into a model of spiritual discipline — David is simply being shown as the man who prays before he acts, in contrast to Saul who did not. While that contrast is real, this reading reduces the inquiries to moral example. The more exegetically grounded reading is that David's repeated seeking of the LORD reflects genuine dependence in a situation of genuine peril — and the LORD's specific, accurate answers (including the disclosure that Keilah *would* betray David, a counterfactual that never occurred) constitute divine disclosure of hidden realities. The inquiries reveal not merely a pious habit but a relationship: David speaks and the LORD answers with specific intelligence. This is covenantal communion, not spiritual discipline as technique.

On Abiathar's ephod (v. 6): Some traditions (particularly those skeptical of direct revelation) treat the ephod as a formal religious mechanism whose significance is cultic rather than theological — priests use sacred objects, and this is simply ancient practice. The Reformed reading understands the ephod as the appointed means through which the LORD reveals His will to His anointed king in a pre-canonical era. The emphasis falls not on the mechanism but on the fact of divine communication: God speaks to David through His appointed priest with His appointed means. The instrument matters less than the reality — God gives David what he cannot obtain through intelligence, strategy, or human counsel: accurate knowledge of hidden things.

On Jonathan's visit (vv. 16–18): Wesleyan and Baptist traditions sometimes read Jonathan's visit primarily as a model of friendship — the comfort of covenant friendship in suffering, the ministry of presence. This is not wrong but is incomplete. The Reformed reading notices that Jonathan explicitly frames David's future kingship in covenantal terms ("you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you," v. 17) and attributes this not to political calculation but to the LORD's purposes ("Saul my father also knows this," v. 17 — implying the LORD's appointment is an acknowledged reality even within Saul's household). Jonathan's ministry to David is not primarily friendship theology; it is covenant confirmation. The LORD uses Jonathan to renew the Davidic covenant's promise precisely at the moment when David's survival seems most in doubt. This is God speaking assurance through a human instrument — a pattern consistent with the whole chapter's logic.

On Saul's near-capture (vv. 25–29): Dispensational readings sometimes treat this passage as straightforward providential narrative with little theological freight beyond "God protected David." The Reformed reading goes further: the Philistine raid is not merely

fortunate timing — it is the LORD’s use of a pagan military incursion as the instrument of His anointed’s deliverance. God does not require favorable conditions to protect His own; He uses the very forces of opposition to accomplish His protective purposes. The place name Sela-hammahlekoth (“rock of escape” or “rock of divisions,” v. 28) functions as a theological monument: the LORD divided Saul from David at the moment of greatest danger. The text is inviting the reader to see the hand of God in what appears to be political-military contingency.

No significant interpretive divergence on the chapter’s overall redemptive-historical function — the chapter is broadly understood across traditions as a narrative of God’s preservation of the Davidic covenant line, anticipating the greater David whose kingship cannot be thwarted by any human opposition.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalms 54** — David’s own psalm composed in the context of the Ziphite betrayal (cf. Psalm 54 superscription), where David cries “God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life” — providing the worshipping response to the very events narrated in 1 Samuel 23.
 - **Psalms 63** — Likely composed during David’s wilderness fugitive period, this psalm embeds the logic of 1 Samuel 23: spiritual thirst in a dry wilderness, enemies seeking David’s life, and the LORD as the one whose steadfast love is better than life — the primary claim of the chapter expressed in devotional voice.
 - **Romans 8:35–39** — Paul’s claim that nothing “shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” provides the New Testament crystallization of the same reality: hostile external circumstances (tribulation, peril, sword) cannot sever the bond between God and His elect. What the LORD demonstrates through David’s wilderness in 1 Samuel 23, Paul declares as the unbreakable covenant reality for every believer in the greater David.
 - **John 10:27–29** — Christ’s declaration that no one can snatch His sheep from His hand or the Father’s hand is the direct fulfillment of the principle 1 Samuel 23 enacts: God’s anointed is kept by divine power, and those belonging to Him share that security.
 - **Hebrews 11:37–38** — The roll call of faith explicitly includes those “wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” — a description that precisely evokes David’s wilderness existence in 1 Samuel 23, and frames it as faith-shaped sojourning rather than divine abandonment.
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Aim:

To demonstrate from 1 Samuel 23 that the LORD's covenant faithfulness is operative even when invisible, so that readers in their own wilderness — however hostile the terrain and however close the threat — may trust the same God who kept David.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Report reaches David: Philistines are fighting against Keilah and raiding the threshing floors	Keilah = Judahite city; threshing floors = harvest, economic survival at stake
2	David inquires of the LORD: “Shall I go and attack?” LORD answers: “Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah”	First inquiry; direct divine answer; no ambiguity
3	David's men object: “We are afraid here in Judah; how much more if we go to Keilah?”	Fear is the obstacle — not disobedience but self- protective reasoning
4	David inquires a second time; LORD repeats and amplifies: “Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand”	Second inquiry driven by the men's fear; LORD does not rebuke the second asking — He answers it
5	David and his men go to Keilah, fight, and deliver it; great blow struck against the Philistines; livestock captured	Deliverance accomplished exactly as promised
6	Parenthetical: When Abiathar fled to David, he brought an ephod down with him	Editorial note explaining how divine inquiry was possible; Abiathar's ephod = means of revelation
7	Saul learns David is in Keilah; Saul interprets this as God “giving David into his hand” — city with gates and bars	Saul's theological arrogance: claiming divine favor for his own murderous agenda
8	Saul summons all the people to war, to go down to	Full military mobilization against David

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Keilah and besiege David and his men	
9	David learns of Saul's plot; tells Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod	David's pattern: respond to threat by seeking God, not by reactive strategy alone
10–11	David inquires: Will Saul come? Will the men of Keilah surrender me? LORD answers both: Yes, Saul will come; yes, they will surrender you	The LORD answers a counterfactual — what <i>would</i> happen, not what ultimately does
12	David asks again: Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul? LORD says: They will surrender you	Confirms the betrayal — a city David just rescued would hand him to his pursuer
13	David and his 600 men depart; they move about wherever they can; Saul abandons the expedition when he learns David has escaped Keilah	Deliverance through departure, not military victory; Saul calls off the campaign
14	David stays in strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph; Saul seeks him daily but God does not give him into his hand	The theological summary of the fugitive period: Saul seeks, God withholds
15	David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life; David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh	Vulnerability: David knows the pursuit is active
16	Jonathan, Saul's son, rises and goes to David at Horesh and strengthens his hand in God	The unexpected provision: the enemy's son as the LORD's instrument of strengthening
17	Jonathan says: "Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you"	Covenant promise renewal; Jonathan subordinates himself to God's appointment of David

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
18	The two make a covenant before the LORD; Jonathan returns home; David remains at Horesh	Covenant sealed; Jonathan departs; David's situation does not change, but the promise has been confirmed
19–20	Ziphites go to Saul at Gibeah: "David is hiding with us — in strongholds at Horesh on the hill of Hachilah. Come down whenever you wish; we will surrender him"	Betrayal by fellow Judahites (Ziphites are from Judah, David's own tribe)
21	Saul blesses them: "May you be blessed by the LORD, for you have had compassion on me"	Theological irony: Saul invokes the LORD's blessing on those helping him murder the LORD's anointed
22–23	Saul instructs them to gather intelligence and return with precise information about David's exact location	Systematic, methodical pursuit — Saul is not irrational, he is ruthlessly determined
24	Ziphites go ahead of Saul; David and his men are in the wilderness of Maon in the Arabah south of Jeshimon	Geography of danger: David is being encircled
25	Saul and his men go to seek David; David hears of it and goes down to the rock in the wilderness of Maon	Cat-and-mouse movement; David's intelligence network functioning
26	Saul goes on one side of the mountain, David on the other; David hurries to escape as Saul and his men are closing in	The moment of maximum danger: physical proximity, no escape route apparent
27	A messenger comes to Saul: "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have raided the land"	The deliverance: not a divine vision, not a miracle, not David's skill — a pagan military raid
28	Saul turns back from pursuing David and goes against the Philistines; the	Toponymic monument to providential deliverance; the place remembers what God

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	place is called Sela-hammahlekoth	did
29	David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En-gedi	Continuation of fugitive existence — not resolution, but continuation under God's hand

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The LORD Sends David to Save Keilah
2	7–13	The LORD Reveals that Keilah Would Betray David
3	14–18	God Does Not Give David into Saul's Hand — and Sends Jonathan
4	19–29	Betrayal, Encirclement, and the Rock of Escape

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe what divine faithfulness looks like in a hostile environment.

David's deliverance in 1 Samuel 23 does not look like triumph — it looks like sustained survival in a worsening situation. He saves a city and nearly dies for it. He is confirmed as the future king and continues sleeping in caves. Readers who have mentally constructed an image of God's covenant faithfulness as the progressive removal of difficulty must have that image replaced by the one the text actually offers: the LORD is faithful to David not by ending the wilderness but by concealing him within it ("God did not give him into his hand,"

v. 14). The application is a direct cognitive challenge: stop measuring God's faithfulness by whether the terrain is improving, and start measuring it by whether He is present in the terrain that is.

2. (Mind/Belief) — Trust that God answers the questions you are too afraid to ask.

David's men are afraid to obey the first answer God gives — so David asks again (v. 4), and God answers again without rebuke. David then asks about Keilah's betrayal — including the counterfactual of what would happen if he stayed — and God answers that too (vv. 10–12). The LORD discloses hidden realities to those who seek Him: not just general assurance, but specific intelligence about specific threats. The application is an invitation to bring the actual question, the feared question, the question that seems presumptuous or too specific — to the God who answers specific questions with specific answers. Do not settle for the general comfort when God is willing to speak to the particular fear.

3. (Affections/Worship) — Allow the unexpected sources of strengthening to do their work. Jonathan's visit (vv. 16–18) is structurally startling: at the moment of maximum danger, God sends comfort through the son of the man trying to kill David. Jonathan does not arrive with military reinforcement or a plan of escape — he comes and “strengthens his hand in God.” He reminds David who David is and where David is going. The application addresses the tendency to dismiss encouragement that arrives in the wrong shape, from the wrong source, without the practical help we wanted. Ask: who is the LORD sending to strengthen your hand in God right now, and are you receiving them? The encouragement that does not solve your problem may be exactly the provision God intends for this moment.

4. (Affections/Worship) — Grieve honestly and worship genuinely in the wilderness — these are not opposites. Psalm 54, David's own response to the Ziphite betrayal, does not suppress the grief of being hunted by his own tribe (“strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life”). It names it. And then it worships: “With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.” First Samuel 23 is the narrative ground under that psalm. The application is permission to bring the full weight of the wilderness situation into the presence of God — the betrayal, the fear, the exhaustion, the encirclement — and to find that worship is not the suppression of those realities but the transformation of them. You do not have to choose between honest grief and confident praise.

5. (Will/Behavior) — Build a practice of seeking God before you act, and before you move, and before you despair. The structural pattern of 1 Samuel 23 is David's repeated inquiry of the LORD at every decision point: go to Keilah? (v. 2); go in the face of fear? (v. 4); stay or leave? (vv. 10–12). This is not David's native temperament overriding his fear — it is a discipline practiced under pressure. The application is concrete: identify the specific situation you are currently navigating where you have been operating on your own assessment, your own fear, or your own strategy, and have not yet asked God what He sees. Bring the ephod. Seek the answer. God does not guarantee that the asking will

remove the wilderness — but He does guarantee that He will not be silent to the one who asks.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

First Samuel 23 is a sustained demonstration of divine omniscience and sovereign providence working in tandem. The LORD's answers to David's inquiries include accurate disclosure of counterfactual events — not merely what will happen, but what would have happened under conditions that never obtain. This is a claim about the kind of God the LORD is: He holds every possible future in His knowledge, and He governs history not by reaction but by intention. Equally significant is the theological logic of v. 14: "Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand." Saul's pursuit is real, determined, and resourced — and it is entirely overmastered by a divine withholding that requires no visible miracle. God does not need to intervene spectacularly to protect His own; He simply does not deliver them, and no human agency can overcome that withholding. The chapter teaches that the security of those whom God has called rests not in their circumstances, their allies, or their skill, but in whether God gives them to their enemy — and the answer, for David, is consistently: He does not.

Reformed Theological Significance

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This chapter embodies the Reformed doctrine of particular providence — God's active, specific governance of the circumstances of His elect — with extraordinary narrative concreteness. Calvin's insistence that providence is not a general divine oversight but a specific divine superintendence of each event is here on full display: the Philistine raid that breaks off Saul's pursuit is not coincidence but the LORD's use of geopolitical contingency as an instrument of covenant faithfulness. The chapter also presses the Reformed understanding of perseverance: David perseveres not because of his own resilience or resources — he is outnumbered, betrayed by those he rescued, and within arm's reach of capture — but because the LORD does not give him into Saul's hand. Perseverance is not a human achievement sustained by divine assistance; it is a divine achievement sustained by covenant faithfulness. Jonathan's reaffirmation of the Davidic covenant in the midst of the fugitive period (vv. 16–18) anticipates the New Testament's logic: God's promises to His anointed are not contingent on the anointed's circumstances but on the covenanting God's unchanging word. For the believer in the greater David, this chapter is an enacted parable of the truth Paul will later articulate: nothing can separate us from the love of God, because the God who made the promise is the God who governs every circumstance that appears to threaten it.

Main Takeaway

The God who kept David alive in the wilderness of Ziph — not through miracles, but through disclosure, through a friend’s timely word, and through a pagan raid at exactly the right moment — is the same God who holds your life in His hand right now. You are not more exposed than David was. You are not more betrayed than he was. And the LORD did not give him into Saul’s hand. He will not give you away either.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing David’s inquiries into a technique for decision-making.** The repetition of David’s ephod consultations (vv. 2, 4, 9–12) can easily become a sermon on “how to make decisions: always pray first.” This flattens what is actually a covenant-relational narrative into a spiritual discipline framework. The point is not the technique — it is the God who answers. Preach the LORD’s responsiveness to David’s need, not David’s methodology as a model to replicate.
- **Treating Jonathan’s visit as primarily a friendship text.** The “Jonathan strengthens David’s hand in God” episode (vv. 16–18) is warm and relational, which makes it an inviting passage for sermon series on friendship, mentorship, or encouragement. All of that is secondarily present. The primary weight is covenantal: Jonathan speaks the promise of the LORD to David at the moment when David most needs to hear it. The visit is an act of God through a human instrument, not primarily an act of friendship that happens to mention God.
- **Missing the structural irony of the Keilah episode.** Preaching the first half of the chapter (vv. 1–13) as a victory narrative (“David delivers Keilah!”) and the second half as a threat narrative misses the deliberate irony the text constructs: the city David saves is the city that would betray him. This irony is central to the chapter’s claim about the wilderness — faithfulness does not produce gratitude, rescue does not secure loyalty, and the LORD is the only reliable protection David has. Failing to preach the irony flattens the chapter’s claim.
- **Treating the Philistine raid (v. 27) as a fortunate coincidence.** The text places this raid at the precise moment of maximum danger and names the place “Sela-hammahlekoth” — a permanent monument to what the LORD did there. Preachers who handle this as narrative movement (“fortunately, the Philistines attacked and Saul had to turn back”) have evacuated the theology. The text is insisting that the pagan raid is God’s instrument. Name it as such.
- **Omitting the Ziphite betrayal’s theological weight.** The Ziphites are Judahites — David’s own tribe. Their betrayal is not background detail; it is the chapter’s

sharpest expression of David's isolation. A preacher who wants to avoid the darkness of betrayal-by-one's-own-people will preach a softer chapter than the one that is actually there. The betrayal is what makes v. 14 ("God did not give him into his hand") so theologically weighty. Do not sand off the pain.

- **Resolving the chapter too quickly toward comfort.** The chapter does not end with David's restoration — it ends with David moving to the strongholds of En-gedi (v. 29). The fugitive existence continues. God's faithfulness in 1 Samuel 23 is not the faithfulness that ends the wilderness; it is the faithfulness that sustains life within it. Preaching that rushes to "and eventually David became king" has abandoned the chapter's own testimony for a more comfortable one. The comfort the chapter offers is real — but it is wilderness comfort, not wilderness removal.