

TIME magazine labeled him the Man of the Twentieth Century. I'm talking about Winston Churchill, the great British leader during World War 2. Some years ago, I remember watching and enjoying a TV mini-series about Churchill entitled: "Churchill: The Wilderness Years." It dramatized a period of several years in Churchill's life before he became Prime Minister when he wasn't very popular and had very little political influence even within his own party. He was, so to speak, out in a political wilderness. The mini-series depicted how this gifted, able leader chafed against and struggled under the experience of being pushed to the sidelines of his nation's politics. The wilderness years....

David had a period in his life like that as well. We're looking at some life lessons through the lens of one of the Bible's central characters: David, a man after and against God's heart. Following his great triumph over the giant Goliath when he was just a teenager, David was honored as a national hero. Then King Saul became murderously jealous of young David and he had to flee for his life. For several years, David literally lived out in deserted, wilderness areas hiding from Saul who made repeated attempts to kill him. We're not told exactly how long this period in David's life lasted, but it's possible David was on the run for between five to ten years. That's a long time to be out in the wilderness!

So many of the people God worked in and through in the Bible had wilderness years! It was 25 years between God's promise of a child to Abraham and the actual birth of Isaac. Joseph sat in an Egyptian prison for two whole years - unjustly accused and punished - before God delivered him. Moses spent 40 years herding sheep in a remote desert before God called him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. God apparently has a purpose in wilderness years and wilderness experiences. There life lessons are learned no other way. There character formation happens in no other way. I'm convinced every child of God will have wilderness experiences. Like David, you and I will have times of both losses and opposition. When you make a study of David's wilderness years, you can learn and apply some valuable spiritual lessons to your own walk through life with God. So, first of all, think with me about...

THE LESSONS FROM LOSSES

What were some of David's losses during this time in his life? After his great victory over Goliath, David was the toast of the town. King Saul made him a permanent part of the royal entourage at the palace. David joined the army and found quick success and advancement. Everybody loved David. Everybody thought David was wonderful. And then King Saul realized that a lot of people loved David more than him. No doubt he recalled the prophet Samuel's prediction that God was going to take away Saul's kingdom and give it to a better man. Could David be that man? If so, Saul was going to try and thwart God's purpose. As quickly as David gained a high position in Israel, he lost it. That

was his first loss – his respected position. Instead of being a hero, he was hunted by Saul as a criminal. Instead of being the king's best friend, he was thought of as Saul's greatest enemy. Instead of being Israel's military leader, David was now the primary object of that army's search and destroy missions. David fled for his life hiding out in caves and remote areas. He couldn't even go back to his own home. David lost his reputation and his respected position.

Secondly David lost most of his family and friends. Early on, Saul had given one of his daughters in marriage to David, but she didn't follow David into exile. Jonathan, Saul's son and heir to the throne of Israel, became David's greatest friend and helped him escape his father's murderous plots. Their brief, intense friendship more or less came to an end once David was on the run. David even had to take his parents to another country, Moab, because he was afraid Saul would persecute them in order to get to him. Even contact with the prophet, Samuel, that wise, godly man who had anointed David to be the next king and was in some sense a mentor to him, was limited. David lost family and friends. Thirdly, it seems to me that several stories about David during this period reveal that he sometimes lost his confidence in God. Fear became an excuse to tell a lie. Fear became an excuse to pretend to be insane. I suggest that David lost something of his confidence in God at least for a period of time during those wilderness years.

What have you lost in the wilderness times of your life? Have you lost something of your position, your reputation, your family, your friends, or your confidence in God? Any kind of loss in life is painful. Losing people you love and lean upon is very hard. Even losing things that you've depended on is very painful. You might feel lonely and helpless. Many times – just like David – these losses enter our lives through no fault of our own. David didn't do anything wrong! He wasn't being punished for being sinful or foolish. His treatment by Saul was completely unfair and unjust. When you suffer loss even though you've done nothing wrong, it makes the hurt from those losses even worse.

Now, I don't like losses. I don't like the fact that God uses losses as lessons either! I wish it weren't true, but it is. God has lessons in losses – for David, for you and for me. Over in the New Testament, we read, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (Jam 1:2-4 NLT) God brings spiritual gains out of earthly losses. You and I need to remember that if we're dealing with some kind of loss today. Of course it hurts! I don't want to trivialize any pain that you feel in the midst of that loss. I'm just suggesting that you look for the spiritual gain God is seeking to bring out in your life through that loss.

You might ask today, "Rick, what did David learn from his losses?" First, David learned that ultimate security is in God alone. One of David's hiding places was

the Cave at Adullam – a labyrinth of limestone caves, tunnels and secret places covering hundreds of rocky, desert acres in Judea not far from his hometown of Bethlehem. It was there in that cave that David wrote at least two of his psalms. One of those was Psalm 57. Let's read a portion of it together right now. Do you see how David came to trust in God alone? How did he learn that lesson? Through loss. The fact is that each of us wants to put our ultimate security in things like position, money, family, friends, our own intelligence and abilities – whatever. It's just hard to put your security in God alone unless you're forced to do so. Sometimes God will use the loss of those things in your life to wean you away from the false security they provide. Their security is an illusion, because only God is the Rock, the Refuge, and the Fortress of your life. He alone is your real and ultimate security.

Secondly, David learned from his losses to keep on looking up to God, crying out to God and holding on to God. Another psalm inspired by his cave experience is Psalm 142. It's a short one, so let's read it as well. David's losses never became an excuse for him to become hard and bitter against God. Instead, his losses had just the opposite effect – they drove him to God! Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher in the 1800s, once said, "Had David prayed as much in his palace as he did in his cave, he might never have fallen into the act which brought such misery upon his latter days." He's referring to David's sins of adultery and murder later in his life, of course. When do you pray with the most energy and passion? When do you seek God and cry out to Him the most? Is it when everything is going well or, instead, when everything seems to be falling apart in your life? Or, here's another perspective to consider. What really impresses you when you observe the life of another follower of Jesus? Is it when he praises God when everything is going well, or is it instead when she blesses God even in the midst of some great loss in life? The people I have come to admire the most in life are the ones who live out this message: "I do not like this at all. I'm afraid. I'm discouraged. I'm anxious. But I'm holding on to God, crying out to God and looking up to God." That's faith and you know it when you see it.

Thirdly, David learned to wait for God instead of to act for God. David was a warrior. When he was just a young man, he killed a lion and a bear that threatened his flock of sheep. When Goliath threatened the army of Israel, David killed him, too. David killed Philistines – kind of the archenemies of the people of Israel - by the hundreds. David was a "can-do, take charge, make it happen, get 'er done" kind of man. He was very comfortable acting for God. But in his wilderness years, David had to learn how to wait for God. David had to learn that God would protect him in God's way and God's time. God would restore his reputation, and make him king in God's way and God's time. I can only imagine that was a real adjustment for David. It was hard to wait and let God work things out on his behalf. God's delays lead to a greater dependency upon God. Some losses in life present you with situations and circumstances that you will just have to leave with God. Instead of acting or doing, you will need to wait for His deliverance or His resolution. Losses can help you learn to wait for God instead

of to act for God. Now, David not only faced losses during his wilderness years, he also experienced opposition. Think with me, them, about...

THE LESSONS FROM OPPOSITION.

If you're pretty familiar with the psalms, you might be tempted to think that David was slightly paranoid when you read all of his references to enemies trying to kill him. No, people were trying to kill David over a period of several years. Lots of people! The most powerful man in Israel, King Saul, wanted him dead. In an effort to capture David, Saul had a force of some 3,000 soldiers with him. That's what I call major opposition! David could have identified with Osama bin Laden - the President of the United States is hunting you down, wanting to kill you and utilizing the services of the armed forces to do so. Now, few of us here this morning have people in our lives actually trying to hurt us physically or kill us. But, we probably do have people - or we've know people - who oppose us. It might be someone at work, someone at school, maybe even someone in your own home. Sometimes church members can get into serious opposition with each other. Just because you're a follower of Jesus, you're not exempted from difficult people and difficult relationships. And, if David is any example, God apparently allows and uses the experience of opposition to teach us life lessons.

What went wrong between King Saul and David? They were great friends - almost like a father/son relationship - until it became obvious that lots of people thought David was a better leader than Saul. Saul became insanely jealous of David. Saul threw a spear at David on three separate occasions trying to pin him to the wall. Saul devised all sorts of plots and schemes to get and kill David. Saul became irrational and possibly demonically influenced, but his hostility to David was frighteningly real just the same. Finally, David gave up on reconciliation with Saul and fled for his life. On at least three occasions, Saul mounted major campaigns to capture and kill David with two of them ending in embarrassing incidents where David could have easily killed Saul if he'd wanted to do so. Let's read one of those now in 1 Samuel 24.

So what did David learn from opposition? First, David learned that retaliation is not God's answer to opposition. David could have killed Saul easily on two occasions. In fact, so remarkable were those two events that David's allies argued that God had delivered Saul to David in order to kill him. Do you recall David's answer? "... 'The LORD forbid that I should do this to my lord the king and attack the LORD's anointed one, for the LORD himself has chosen him.'" (1 Sam 24:6 NLT) Because David had never been given specific permission from God to kill Saul, he refused to do so. Even the opportunity to retaliate wasn't seen as implied permission from God. The Holy Spirit enabled David to exercise a remarkable self-control at this very point that honored God. David was willing to let God deal with Saul in God's time and God's way. There's a life lesson.

Revenge and retaliation is never God's way of dealing with people who oppose you at any level of life. Action movies depict how the world thinks you ought to respond to any and all opposition. Blow 'em away! Give 'em a taste of their own medicine! Nuke 'em! But that's never God's way. God's Word tells you to leave retaliation to Him. "Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the LORD." (Rom 12:17-19 NLT)

Someone will ask, of course, "Are you just supposed to let people walk all over you or mistreat you?" No, and that's the second lesson David learned from opposition. He learned that confrontation is God's method of dealing with opposition. Confrontation is not retaliation! David stood up and declared the truth. He didn't just sit and take it. But then he waited and let the Lord do the work. We followers of Jesus need to take his example to heart, because we do precious little confrontation or we do it poorly. If we're injured, attacked or unfairly opposed by someone, we know it's unbiblical to retaliate. So we conclude that repressing it is godly. But that's wrong, too. Repression isn't God's answer to injury, hurt or opposition. All repression does is make you bitter.

We've got a pretty good model of godly confrontation there in 1 Samuel 24. David challenges Saul by telling him he's been unjust in listening to slanders against David. It's godly to challenge people who've hurt you. Then David reminds Saul that he – David – fears the Lord and lives by God's standards. You can remind those who oppose you that because you live by God's standards, they have no reason to be fearful of you. David goes on to demonstrate to Saul through an amazing act of mercy and kindness that he had no evil intentions towards Saul. In the same way, it's a godly act when you can show kindness and grace to someone who opposes you. Then, David makes sure Saul knows that Saul's behavior is not going to determine David's behavior. Even though Saul is trying to kill him, David is not going to try and kill Saul. Those who oppose you can be told that how they act towards you will not determine how you act towards them. In this encounter with Saul, we see David take a place of humility. When you confront someone who is opposing you, do it with a humble spirit. Confrontation is never an opportunity to insult people. Finally, David reminds Saul that he's committing their entire relationship to God and His justice. In other words, our enemies – people who oppose us, dislike us and make life difficult for us for no good reason – need to be reminded that Someone else is watching and that Someone is God. You will not seek revenge, but God will avenge all injustice and wrongdoing and God is not Someone you mess with!

Does godly confrontation work all the time? Of course not! Saul says he's sorry in the text we read together and then two chapters later he's trying to kill David yet again. David knew better than to trust Saul. Some folk in this life are never going to become your "bosom buddies." And that's not God's expectation for you

either. Some people will hate and oppose you because they hate and oppose the God they see in you. I believe that was part of Saul's problem. He saw God in David's life and he hated him for it! What does God require then? Practice godly confrontation rather than retaliation and revenge. Treat the people who oppose you with integrity, kindness and self-control.

Finally, I believe David learned from opposition that God will honor and protect His own. Opposition is never enjoyable; nevertheless, it is a part of following Jesus in this life. No one suffered more opposition in His life than Jesus. Why should you and I be exempt from it? But God puts a protective shield and defense around us like He did David. From his own personal experience, David wrote these words, "Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you. He will make your innocence radiate like the dawn, and the justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun. Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for him to act. Don't worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes." (Ps 37:5-7 NLT)

Farmers down in southern Alabama were accustomed to planting only one crop every year – year after year. Cotton. They'd plow up as much ground as they could and plant cotton. Their complete and only source of income was cotton. Then one year the dreaded boll weevil devastated the cotton crop in the whole area. So, the next year the farmers mortgaged their homes and planted cotton again hoping for a better harvest. But the boll weevil returned, destroyed the cotton crop yet again and wiped out most of the farms. The few who survived those two years of the boll weevil decided to plant something else the third year – something they'd never planted before: peanuts. And peanuts proved to be so hardy and the demand for them so plentiful that the farmers who survived the first two years reaped profits that third year that enabled them to pay off all their debts. They planted peanuts from then on and prospered greatly. Then you know what those farmers did? They spent some of their wealth to erect in the town square of Enterprise, Alabama a monument. To what? To whom? To the boll weevil! It's the only monument to an insect anywhere in the world. Why? If it hadn't been for the boll weevil, they never would have discovered peanuts. Those farmers learned that out of loss can come gain, out of disaster can come delight and out of opposition can come new discoveries.

Like David and like those Alabama farmers, there will be times when you and I will feel devastated, wiped out and beyond hope. But God is all about bringing good out of bad if we just wait long enough and let Him. The losses and opposition in David's life were very hard to take as they are in your life and mine. But God has lessons in losses and opposition that helped to make David a man after God's heart. I wonder if there will come a day in your life and mine when we actually become grateful for the losses and the opposition in our lives because of the eternal good and the spiritual good they have produced in us. After all, God wants your heart to be for Him and after Him, too.