

1 Samuel 21 - David Flees to Nob, Eats Shewbread; David Flees to Gath, Acts Insane

IV. Transition from the house of Saul to the house of David (1 Samuel 16:1—31:13)

(3) David in exile from the pursuing Saul (21:1—29:11)

(A) David and his men given weaponry and nourishment by the priest Ahimelech in Nob (21:1-10)

(B) David feigns insanity in order to be protected from Achish in Gath (21:11-15)

1 Samuel 21

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1 Then David came to **Nob**, to Ahimelech the priest; and **Ahimelech** came trembling to meet David and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?"

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1 David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest, and Ahimelech was trembling as he came to meet David. Ahimelech told him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?"

1 Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech the priest: and Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David, and said unto him, Why art thou alone, and no man with thee?

- David's flight from Saul meant that he left the people, places and things he loved. He fled as one appointed by God to be king, but unjustly accused and condemned to death by Saul.

— Under extreme pressure, David acted like a man after God's own heart by seeking help and peace in the house of the Lord

- "...Nob" - at that time it was a priests' city (22:19), where the Tabernacle stood and where legal worship was carried on

— According to Is 10:30,32, it was between Anathoth and Jerusalem, about one mile north of Jerusalem, on a ridge from the brow of which one can see the temple area

- "...Ahimelech" - "My Brother is King"; also called "Ahijah"

— He was the great-grandson of Eli

- Ahimelech was fearful because David was alone (David was Saul's general, and would typically travel with escorting soldiers)

- Ahimelech was unsure if Saul had sent David to harm the priests (Cf. 22:6-23), or if David was in some kind of trouble
- Since the Tabernacle was now at Nob, it is likely that either he, or his father, removed the Tabernacle from Shiloh and installed it at Nob
- The Ark remained at Kiriath Jearim with the family of Abinadab

David in Exile

As far as can be determined, David was a young man of no more than 20 when he was forced to leave Saul's palace and his own home because of Saul's relentless determination to destroy him. Driven to the wilderness area of Judah, the logical place because of his familiarity with it from childhood, David lived out a "Robin Hood" existence for nearly 10 years (1 Sam 21-31); 13 years if you reckon from the defeat of Goliath until his anointing as King of Judah (2 Sam 2:1-4).

The events of 1 Sam 21-26 only represent a fraction of David's activity during this period. But God was teaching David many things in those days, lessons David still shares with all who read his psalms which find their setting in this turbulent period of his life (i.e., Ps 18; 34; 52; 54; 56-57; 63; 124; 138; 142).

2 David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, 'No one is to know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'

2 David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'

2 David told Ahimelech the priest, "The king commanded me about a matter, saying to me, 'Don't let anyone know anything about the matter I'm sending you to do and about which I've commanded you. I've directed the young men to a certain place.'

2 And David said unto Ahimelech the priest, The king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, Let no man know any thing of the business whereabout I send thee, and what I have commanded thee: and I have appointed my servants to such and such a place.

- David needed help, but chose to request it through lies; from there, one lie led to many lies

— While it's easy to sympathize with David's weakness and possible reasons, nevertheless God loves truth. David's lies were rooted in selfishness and lack of faith in God.

— God never needs help, especially not lies, to accomplish His purposes. David served his purpose, in his way, but the outcome for Ahimelech was tragic.

— David made some mistakes in his early days as a fugitive, but handled himself better as time went on

3 Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found."

3 Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found."

3 Now, what do you have available? Give me five loaves of bread or whatever you have."

3 Now therefore what is under thine hand? give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present.

4 The priest answered David and said, "There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread, if only the young men have kept themselves from women."

4 The priest answered David and said, "There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women."

4 The priest answered David: "There is no ordinary bread available; only consecrated bread, provided that the young men have kept themselves from women."

4 And the priest answered David, and said, There is no common bread under mine hand, but there is hallowed bread; if the young men have kept themselves at least from women.

- There was no ordinary bread available, only the holy showbread (Ex 25:30) which had been desacralized by being replaced with fresh bread (v6; Cf. Lev 24:5-9)

— The holy shewbread symbolized God's continual fellowship with Israel (Ex 25:23-30; Lev 24:5-9)

— This could be eaten, as Jesus suggested later on (Matt 12:3-4), but ordinarily only by the priests and certainly only by those who were ceremonially pure (had not had sex with a woman that day, Lev 15:8; Ex 19:14-15)

— David's eating of the bread illustrated a concession that the Law permitted—life is more holy than bread (Matt 12:7-8)

— God's righteousness, or right-ness, includes acts of compassion, not coldhearted ritual observance

5 David answered the priest and said to him, "Be assured, women have been denied to us as previously when I left and the **bodies** of the young men were consecrated, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then will their bodies be consecrated today?"

5 David answered the priest and said to him, "Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an

ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels *be holy*?"

5 David answered the priest, saying to him, "Indeed, women were kept from us as is usual whenever I go out on a mission, and the equipment of the young men is consecrated even when it's an ordinary journey, so how much more is their equipment consecrated today?"

5 And David answered the priest, and said unto him, Of a truth women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel.

- "...bodies" - this may refer to the young men's bodies (in context, specifically his genitals, Cf. 1 Thess 4:4)

— The men were ceremonially clean so they were fit to partake of holy things

- Ahimelech departed from the Levitical law and observed the higher commandment of love to a neighbor (Lev 19:18)

— David was probably not at the point of starvation; the disciples certainly were not (Cf. Matt 12). Nevertheless, human need should always be higher priority than the observance of a ritual used to worship God.

- When Mark 2:26 assigns this action to the days of Abiathar, the high priest, the statement assumes the son acted as co-adjudicator to his father, as Eli's sons apparently did (Cf. 1 Sam 4:4)

6 So the priest gave him consecrated *bread*; for there was no bread there except the **bread of the Presence** which was removed from *its place* before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* on the day it was taken away.

6 So the priest gave him consecrated *bread*; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* when it was taken away.

6 So the priest gave him consecrated bread because no bread was there except the Bread of the Presence that had been removed from the LORD's presence and replaced with hot bread on the day it was taken away.

6 So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away.

- The priest gave David and his men the holy bread to eat and also (v9) the sword of Goliath for David's protection

- "...bread of the Presence" - the shewbread; it was solemnly placed as an offering in the presence of Jehovah

— A golden table for the shewbread in Solomon's Temple is mentioned in 1 Kings 7:48; and the form of the table, as it existed in Herod's Temple, is preserved in the sculptures on the Arch of Titus at Rome.

— The shewbread was renewed every Sabbath, and the loaves that remained were to be eaten by the priests in the Holy Place
— Jesus referred to this incident (Matt 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-26; Luke 6:3-5), to show that when moral and ceremonial obligations come into conflict, the ceremonial gives way to the moral

7 Now one of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD; and his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds.

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7 Now, Doeg the Edomite, one of Saul's officials, was there that day, detained in the LORD's presence. He was the chief of Saul's shepherds.

7 Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD; and his name was Doeg, an Edomite, the chiefest of the herdmen that belonged to Saul.

- The whole plan seemed to be successful, except that one of Saul's spies, Doeg, was there to witness the events (Cf. 22:9-19)

— Doeg may have entered the service of Saul after the Israelite campaign against Edom (14:47)

— This ultimately led to treachery and bloodshed (22:9ff; see Ps 52 and note in the title)

8 David said to Ahimelech, "Now is there no spear or sword on hand? For I brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's matter was urgent."

8 David said to Ahimelech, "Now is there not a spear or a sword on hand? For I brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's matter was urgent."

8 David told Ahimelech, "Is there no spear or sword available here? I took neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's mission is urgent."

8 And David said unto Ahimelech, And is there not here under thine hand spear or sword? for I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste.

- David first asked Ahimelech for provision (v3), now he sought protection

9 Then the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod; if you would take it for yourself, take *it*. For there is no other except it here." And David said, "There is none like it; give it to me."

9 Then the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah, behold, it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod; if you would take it for yourself, take *it*. For there is no other except it here." And David said, "There is none like it; give it to me."

9 The priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah is wrapped up in a cloth behind the ephod. If you want it, take it because there is no other except it here."

So David said, "There is none like it. Give it to me."

9 And the priest said, The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod: if thou wilt take that, take it: for there is no other save that here. And David said, There is none like that; give it me.

- Goliath's huge sword, which David used to decapitate Goliath, initially rested in David's tent (17:54); now, it was in the Tabernacle wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod, probably being kept because it was a historical relic.

10 Then David set out and fled that day from Saul, and went to **Achish** king of Gath.

10 Then David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath.

10 David got up that day and fled from Saul, and he went to King Achish of Gath.

10 And David arose, and fled that day for fear of Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath.

- If David's deception of Achish seems odd for a man after God's own heart, his behavior at Gath seems even more shocking

— As happens when we respond to pressures and fear with lies instead of faith, bad decisions are sure to follow

— Pressed to make a quick decision, David sought peace from Saul amongst Israel's enemies

- "...Achish" - or, Achish; the superscription of Ps 34 refers to the king of Gath as "Achish" (note difference from "Achish" in v1-9)

- It's a mystery why David sought refuge with Goliath's sword in the giant's hometown

— Possibly he thought he'd be welcome there since he was fleeing from Saul

(B) David feigns insanity in order to be protected from Achish in Gath (21:11-15)

11 But the servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not David, the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands'?"

11 But the servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands'?"

11 The officials of Achish told him, "Isn't this David, king of the land? Isn't this the one about whom they sang as they danced, 'Saul has struck down his thousands, but David his ten thousands'?"

11 And the servants of Achish said unto him, Is not this David the king of the land? did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?

- Note that the people identified David and called him Israel's king
- Achish's advisors viewed David as a threat

12 David took these words to heart and greatly feared Achish king of Gath.

12 David took these words to heart and greatly feared Achish king of Gath.

12 David took these words seriously, and he was very frightened of King Achish of Gath.

12 And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath.

- Matters were going from bad to worse, just as they always do when we trust ourselves instead of the wisdom of God. David had now fled into the hands of the enemy!

— "The fear of man brings a snare," and David almost snared himself right in enemy territory! David had to pretend to be out of his mind before he could escape.

— "O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

— When we seek peace in the wrong way, or in the wrong place, fear increases

13 So he disguised his sanity *while* in their sight and acted insanely in their custody, and he **scribbled** on the doors of the gate, and drooled on his beard.

13 So he disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard.

13 So David changed his behavior before them and acted like he was crazy in their presence. He scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down his beard.

13 And he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard.

- David sensed his personal danger and pretended to be insane to save his life

— As strange as David's behavior was, Psalm 34 says it involved repentance and was used by God to bring about his deliverance

- "...scribbled" - "made meaningless marks"

— The LXX reads "beat or drummed" from a word which sounds like (but is not written like) the Hebrew for "scrabble"

14 Then Achish said to his servants, "Look, you see the man is behaving like an insane person. Why do you bring him to me?"

14 Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man behaving as a madman. Why do you bring him to me?"

14 Achish told his officials, "Look, you see a person acting like a madman. Why'd you bring him to me?"

14 Then said Achish unto his servants, Lo, ye see the man is mad: wherefore then have ye brought him to me?"

15 Do I lack insane people, that you have brought this one to behave like an insane person in my presence? Shall this one come into my house?"

15 Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence? Shall this one come into my house?"

15 Am I lacking madmen that you bring me this one to act like a madman around me? Shall this one come into my house?"

15 Have I need of mad men, that ye have brought this fellow to play the mad man in my presence? shall this fellow come into my house?

- David's acting job worked; Achish dismissed him, concluding that David was crazy and could be of no help to him against Saul (Cf. 29:3,6,9; Ps 34; 56)

- David is now completely separated from Saul's court and is considered an outlaw and a rebel. Psalm 34 grew out of his narrow escape from Achish.

David wrote Psalm 34 to reveal his thinking during his tenure in, and escape from, Gath.

Ps 34:19 [NKJV]: Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

It is amazing how men and women of faith can gradually become men and women of fear and unbelief. If we get in a hurry, trust people, and trust our own plans, before long everything falls to pieces and we find ourselves out of the place of God's blessing and protection. We shall see in later chapters that David learned to wait on the Lord and seek His will.

These chapters (1 Sam 21-31) are highly instructive for two reasons. First, they help us see how the difficulties that God permitted David to experience refined his character and prepared him for the throne (Cf. Heb. 12). Second, they illustrate the sovereignty of God in working out His plans for both Saul and David. They help us see how God works and uses the choices people make to accomplish His will.

Interesting, too, are the parallels between David's experiences as the Lord's anointed and Jesus Christ's as the Lord's anointed. Rejection preceded acceptance, and suffering preceded reigning, in both cases. God blessed both of these servants personally, and they became a blessing to others because of their commitment to Yahweh and His Law.

The true servant of God must willingly suffer affliction with the full assurance that God is performing His purposes. Positions of prominence and prestige are not to be sought and worked for. Rather, the leader who desires Christ's blessing must wait patiently on Him for advancement and promotion to opportunities of greater service.