
Gathering Loyal Followers

1 Samuel 22²¹

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Psalm 57:1–4 (NLT)

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy!
I look to you for protection.
I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings
until the danger passes by.

² I cry out to God Most High,
to God who will fulfill his purpose for me.

³ He will send help from heaven to rescue me,
disgracing those who hound me.

Interlude

My God will send forth his unfailing love and faithfulness.

⁴ I am surrounded by fierce lions
who greedily devour human prey—
whose teeth pierce like spears and arrows,
and whose tongues cut like swords.

This is the opening stanzas of one of two Psalms David composed that express his experience during his time in the cave, We hear David's sense of aloneness and helplessness, apart from the Lord. But he moves toward the One who was his only secure refuge. So there is resolution and hope as David's trust in God rises.

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David and His Care

(v. 1-5)

People are drawn to David because of his care for them.

His Gathering of Outcasts

(v. 1-2)

¹ David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. ² And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men.

Once again David is escaping. He has long been escaping from Saul. Now he is escaping from the Philistines of Gath. In a vivid picture of darkness and hopelessness, he ends up camping in the cave of Adullam. At first he arrives there alone. But soon there is a gathering of people there.

First his family comes to him. His brothers and everyone in his father's household. This appears to be a fairly large group. This is not a visit to see how he is doing. Since it seems to include extended family and household servants, this is the gathering of a clan.

Others come to David. Distressed, in financial ruin, bitter in soul – these come to David. They hear of his being a fugitive from Saul. They identify with his plight. They know his distress and difficulty. And so they come. Not just them men, but their families as we are told later. The cave and its surrounding fields are dotted with the tents and possibly simple structures becoming homes.

David becomes their commander. This is the beginning of David's court and David's mighty men. He cares for them. He understands them. They respect him. He begins to organize them into a small, but effective mobile military unit. All the skills he learned in the years under Saul now serve him well. Finally, this band of ragtag outcasts of Israel's society have become a band of men, 400 in number.

His Guarding of Family

(v. 3-5)

³ And David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and my mother stay with you, till I know what God will do for me." ⁴ And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. ⁵ Then the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not remain in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah." So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth.

David is concerned for his family. He is concerned that Saul may strike out at them in order to get to him. They have openly declared their loyalty to David by joining him at his headquarters. We do not know all his motivations – the narrator only seems to be showing us how the future king drew out such fierce loyalty to him.

So he goes to the king of Moab and seeks asylum for his family there. He is putting them out of Saul's reach. This is not a place Saul would think to look for them nor a place he is likely to invade just to get to David.

While he seeks protection for his family, he still speaks of his trust in God's providence. I do not believe that David is saying, "I am not sure that this is all going to turn out. I am not sure God is in control of this." Rather, he is expressing trust in God but uncertainty about the unfolding steps of God's providence. He knows he has been anointed to be king. So, he will come to the kingship. He cannot and does not see the path between where he stands and the throne he has been promised.

Unlike Saul, David is submissive to the Word and will of God. He is told by a prophet of God not to stay in Moab with his family. He needs to go to the land of Judah. He needs to leave the relative safety of Moab and go to the heartland of Israel. He is being told to hide in plain view. And he does. We get a different verb now. This is a departure, not an escape.

Saul and His Conspiracies

(v. 6-19)

Now the camera fades out on David and fades in on Saul. Saul is becoming increasingly fearful and paranoid.

His Complaint against the People

(v. 6-10)

⁶ Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him. Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. ⁷ And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, "Hear now, people of Benjamin; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, ⁸ that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day." ⁹ Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, ¹⁰ and he inquired of the Lord for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

What a scene this is. Saul is sitting outside on a hill under a tree, his infamous spear in his hand. He is surrounded by his servants. These servants are all from his own tribe. At some level this is understandable. But in the light of Saul's vanities and fears, this may more be a result at self-preservation. He surrounds himself with family and tribe who are all beholden to him.

In the tableau Saul is attempting to appear regal but our narrator has turned it into one of pathetic paranoia. The pose is pitiful. The discovery of David and his band has set Saul off. They are all conspiring against him No one has told him. They are keeping vital information from him. What, do they expect that David will reward them for treason?

And listen to the last sentence. What? Jonathan *has stirred up my servant*. Jonathan is behind David's rebellion? He has enticed David to ambush Saul to kill him so that Jonathan can take the throne early? This is rich. You can imagine the servants standing around looking at one another. David has been identified as one of them – Saul's servant. So, are they being identified as one of David's servants?

But maybe this is just another day in paradise. They have gotten so used to Saul's tirades and whining fears that they simply don't hear it any more. But there is someone who does, someone who has become chief of Saul's herdsman. His foreign voice is raised above the stunned silence. He tells what he has seen. Let's not give Doeg, the Edomite, any credit. He has evil in his heart and half-truths in his mouth. The half-truths between David and the priest, Ahimelech at least had the excuse of preserving life, protecting the future king and providing for the fugitive. These half-truths have no root but malice, no purpose but poison and no fruit but destruction.

His Charge against the Priests

(v. 11-19)

Doeg had stood in the shadows at Nob, detained by the priests. Now he will have his revenge.

¹¹ Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob, and all of them came to the king. ¹² And Saul said, "Hear now, son of Ahitub." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." ¹³ And Saul said to him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?" ¹⁴ Then Ahimelech answered the king, "And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law, and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house? ¹⁵ Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No! Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little." ¹⁶ And the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house." ¹⁷ And the king said to the guard who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me." But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the Lord. ¹⁸ Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn and strike the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. ¹⁹ And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword.

Saul's often towering rage is now a fierce and deadly purpose. He summons the priest, his family and all the priests into his presence. Our narrator states this in a couple of sentences. However it would have taken a few hours to send a messenger, gather everyone and return. Yet there sits Saul and his servants. Still waiting. What happens to the average person who is waiting to deal with someone who has betrayed them? Yes, it turns over and over in their minds. Conversations are imagined. Motives are attributed.

Scenes are played out in the mind. The narrator blessedly hides the dark procession of thoughts from us – but we know they are there. Saul is not sitting here meditating on the glory of God or the depths of His Word. He is contemplating the vulnerability of his own greatness and the vileness of priestly treason against his magnificent largess.

And so Saul accuses the priests of treason against the throne for their support of David, the rebel. They have provided for David. They have armed David. And they have inquired of the Lord for David. God no longer responds to Saul; how dare they ask and get answers from God for David?

Ahimelech is an insightful and godly man. He knows what is behind this charge. He does not defend himself. He defends the innocence of an innocent man. In the response to Saul we hear what has been filling the mind of Saul.

In Ahimelech's answer and defense of David we hear the vindication of our Lord.

Jesus, like David was faithful in all God's house.

Jesus, like David, has lovingly cared for his bride.

Jesus, like David, has victoriously commanded the hosts of the Lord's army.

Jesus, like David, has been honored by those in His true household.

So let no false claim be made against David. Let Jesus stand before us faithful, loving, victorious and honored.

And let there be nothing imputed to the high priests nor those who serve in the tabernacle of the Lord. Ahimelech knows nothing but good of David. He knows nothing of plots or plans or purposes against Saul. God's priests have acted in true knowledge and in good faith. Can Saul say the same.

Rising in the frightful anger field by deep gear and read, Saul orders his servants to slaughter the priests. But they will not. For once they fear God more than the fear Saul.

Saul knows his own kind among his followers. He turns to Doeg. The twisted cruel smile plays on Doeg's mouth. Yes, yes he will. He will obey his king. He will follow the orders of Saul which only trace the trajectory of his own vengeance. He steps forward his sword in his hand. A blade flashes and blood flows. Before it is over eighty-five priests are dead. I can only surmise that the servants who would not lift a hand to harm the priests also will not lift a hand to save them. Doeg is revealed to be a monster of immense proportions for he slaughters all that dwelled in Nib, man, woman, child and beasts.

David and His Comfort**(v. 20-23)**

Even in such terrible crimes and needless slaughter, God's providences and purposes are carried out. Have a listen once more to the middle stanzas of the "in the cave" Psalm.

Psalm 57:5-6

⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens!
May your glory shine over all the earth.

⁶ My enemies have set a trap for me.
I am weary from distress.
They have dug a deep pit in my path,
but they themselves have fallen into it.

Interlude

His Regret**(v. 20-22)**

God brings the future priesthood under David through his comfort and protection of them.

²⁰ But one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. ²¹ And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. ²² And David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house.

One priest out of them all escaped. He fled to David in Judah. He told the horrible story of all that had happened. David had wondered when he saw Doeg that he would tell Saul. Here I think we get the motivation and reason for the charade that was played out. David hoped to get what he needed. He also hoped to protect Ahimelech.

But oh the slaughter and sorrow he has been the occasion of. He is not its cause. Saul and Doeg are. But his decisions exposed the priesthood's support of David that led to their deaths.

His Relationship**(v. 23)**

²³ Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping."

David extends an invitation that arises from a sense of responsibility. That responsibility will develop into a relationship. Abiathar will become the high priest under David's kingship.

So we have the gathering of the loyal followers. There is his family hidden away in Moab. There is ragtag band of four hundred who would form the nucleus of David's mighty men. There is Abiathar the priest who would lead the worship of God with songs of the sweet singer of Israel. God is forming the inner circle most of whom would serve him well. But not all, not all...

Reflect and Respond

On a quiet night in Palestine many centuries later, Jesus gathered with His loyal followers. It was a dark night, the night of betrayal, arrest leading to false charges, illegal trial, and a criminal's death on a Roman cross. But on that night, at the end of the Passover becoming Communion supper, Jesus sang a song with His followers.

This is ever the way of God's people. Last year, when In the Far East when the RSB entered and halted our training, all of the students and teachers were photographed and their ID's taken and copied. We did not know what the next hours would bring. But in the darkness of that hour, the students sang. They sang songs of God's triumph at the cross and resurrection as gospel, as good news, to the police who surrounded us.

In the south of the Sudan, Out of the horror of genocide against a people many of whom are Christians, have come songs and singing that we can hardly imagine. Songs of trust and hope and clinging to God as death and destruction march across the sands at the hands of Islamic soldiers.

We must learn to sing like this. Oh, it is great to sing in the gatherings of our church community. It is great to sing when all is light. But to sing "in the cave"... this is moment when eternity's glory rising over the horizon of time gives light to this present darkness. May everywhere, in all ways, at all times our songs arise "in the cave".

And may it sound like this:

Psalm 57:7–11 (NLT)

⁷ My heart is confident in you, O God;
my heart is confident.
No wonder I can sing your praises!

⁸ Wake up, my heart!
Wake up, O lyre and harp!
I will wake the dawn with my song.

⁹ I will thank you, Lord, among all the people.
I will sing your praises among the nations.

¹⁰ For your unfailing love is as high as the heavens.
Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.

¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens.
May your glory shine over all the earth.

