

The Life of David

David as a Fugitive

1 Samuel 21:1-15

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Scripture

God rejected Saul as king over Israel because of his disobedience, and chose David instead, although he was not immediately coronated. Because of David's growing popularity with the people, Saul became extremely jealous of David, and tried to kill him. Eventually, Saul's son Jonathan warned David that his father indeed wanted to kill David. And so David became a fugitive from Saul for many years.

Let's read about David as a fugitive in 1 Samuel 21:1-15:

¹Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" ²And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. ³Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here." ⁴And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women." ⁵And David answered the priest, "Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?" ⁶So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

⁷Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen.

⁸Then David said to Ahimelech, "Then have you not

here a spear or a sword at hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste." ⁹ And the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it, for there is none but that here." And David said, "There is none like that; give it to me."

¹⁰ And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath. ¹¹ And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances,

'Saul has struck down his thousands,
and David his ten thousands?'"

¹² And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. ¹³ So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. ¹⁴ Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? ¹⁵ Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" (1 Samuel 21:1-15)

Introduction

Charles Jenkins had been a good soldier for nine years. He had a Good Conduct Award and had been promoted to sergeant. But on January 5, 1965, after ten days of planning and ten beers, he tied a white tee-shirt to his rifle and defected to the North Koreans. He disappeared in that dark country for nearly forty years, until 2004, when he was able to leave North Korea to seek medical treatment in Japan. Shortly after that he turned himself in to U. S. military authorities. At his court martial, the frail, tearful 64-year-

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old soldier pled guilty to desertion. He told the judge, “Ma’am, I am in fact guilty.”

Why did he walk away from his unit and his country? He said he fled because he was afraid he’d be transferred to dangerous day-time patrols in the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas, or worse, Vietnam. Jenkins wept as he described his depression, fears of death, and heavy drinking leading up to his desertion. He thought he’d be returned home, but instead he suffered under harsh conditions all his life. “I knew 100 percent what I was doing, but I did not know the consequences,” said Jenkins. It was 20 years before anyone in America even knew he was alive.¹

King-elect David had been a good soldier for a number of years too. He was the only one in Israel who was willing to fight Goliath, the Philistine. David prevailed over Goliath with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him (1 Samuel 17:50). Then David cut off Goliath’s head with Goliath’s own sword (17:51). Later, David had numerous successful campaigns against the Philistines, prompting the women of Israel to sing, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7).

This ditty provoked Saul’s jealousy, which escalated to the point that he tried to kill David on a number of occasions. So, David became fugitive from Saul, and also became gripped by fear.

Lesson

First Samuel 21:1-15 shows us the foolishness of a believer gripped by fear.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. David Visited Ahimelech at Nob (21:1-9)
2. David Fled to Achish at Gath (21:10-15)

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/june/16010.html>.

I. David Visited Ahimelech at Nob (21:1-9)

First, David visited Ahimelech at Nob.

First Samuel 20 tells about Jonathan warning David that his father Saul really did want to kill David. After a tearful farewell, David left Jonathan in Gibeah. **Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest (21:1a).** Nob was only about two miles south of Saul and Jonathan's home in Gibeah.

It is not exactly clear why David went to visit **Ahimelech the priest at Nob**. Perhaps he went to get help from the priests and also from the Lord.

Nevertheless, three things happened when David visited Ahimelech at Nob.

A. *David Told a Falsehood (21:1-2)*

First, David told a falsehood.

When David arrived at Nob, **Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling (21:1b)**. The reason **Ahimelech** was **trembling** is perhaps because news of Saul's desire to kill David had spread so that the people of Israel did not want to give refuge to a fugitive on the run from their king. So, **Ahimelech said to David, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" (21:1b)**. A man of David's position did not travel alone, and **Ahimelech** was immediately suspicious; hence, the question.

Perhaps Ahimelech's question unnerved David. Certainly, Ahimelech's trembling helped David know that he was not getting a warm welcome. So, David panicked.

In the previous chapter, David told Jonathan to lie on his behalf regarding his whereabouts (20:6). Now, David resorted to another falsehood. He **said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and**

with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place” (21:2). David claimed to be on a secret mission from King Saul, with his men hidden away nearby. That was a blatant falsehood. It was a lie. It was a deception.

There is a lesson here for us: *never tell a falsehood*. A. W. Pink writes, “Though ingenious falsehoods may seem to promote present security, yet they insure future disgrace.”² The Bible is full of examples of men and women whose lies may seem to have promoted present securities, but they actually insured future disgrace. Think of Jacob and his deception with his lie to get his brother’s birthright. This resulted in Esau eventually wanting to kill Jacob so that Jacob had to flee from his homeland for more than twenty years.

You may feel that you have to tell a falsehood. You don’t tell your spouse where you really have been. You are not clear with your supervisor about the status of your project. You don’t tell your elder that you are struggling spiritually. My dear brothers and sisters, let me assure you that you may think that your falsehood is promoting a present security, but in fact it will insure a future disgrace. And David is an illustration of such a future disgrace.

B. David Asked a Favor (21:3-6; 8-9)

Second, David asked a favor.

Actually, David asked for two favors, First, David asked Ahimelech for bread. Presumably, David had fled from Gibeah with nothing but the shirt on his back. And so he needed food. **“Now then,”** David asked, **“what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here”** (21:3). Ahimelech explained that he had no common bread on hand; he only had holy

² Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Life of David* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 1 Sa 21.

bread. That is, the bread on hand was the bread of the Presence, which was set out each Sabbath and replaced the following week with fresh bread. The older bread was given to the priests for them to eat. It was part of the ceremonial law regarding God's worship. Ahimelech said that he would give the bread to David if David's men had kept themselves from women. David said they had, which was in fact another falsehood, in that David had no men with him. So, Ahimelech gave David the holy bread (21:4-6).

The lesson here is this: *God's law is fulfilled by acts of mercy*. Some Bible commentators say that mercy supersedes obedience to the law, but that is not correct. Jesus once made a point about the Sabbath day by referring to this story. The Pharisees had accused Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath law because they picked and ate grain as they walked through a field. Jesus said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" (Matthew 12:3-4). Jesus' point is not that mercy supersedes obedience to the law. Rather, Jesus' point is that the intent of God's law is fulfilled by acts of mercy. My friend, Gordon Keddie, explains, "The true meaning of the ceremonial law of the showbread was expressed in its being given to David as an act of compassion and mercy providing for real need; the law was fulfilled, rather than superseded."³

Jesus' reference to this story helps us understand how to "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:6). Jesus "warn us against excessive rules that make the Lord's Day a burden. For instance, it does not violate but fulfill the Sabbath to gather for Christian fellowship in a joyful spirit, to provide a meal to shut-ins, or to engage in any other spiritually wholesome form

³ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 196.

of liberality and generosity.”⁴

David’s second favor to ask of Ahimelech was for a weapon. **Then David said to Ahimelech, “Then have you not here a spear or a sword at hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king’s business required haste”** (21:8). Here was another falsehood. The reason David had no weapons was not because of **the king’s business** but rather because of his hasty flight. Nevertheless, Ahimelech said, **“The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it, for there is none but that here.”** And David said, **“There is none like that; give it to me”** (21:9). Do you remember when David went out to fight against Goliath, he refused Saul’s armor? At that time, David’s trust was in the Lord, and he simply went into battle with his sling and five smooth stones. Now, David’s fear of Saul had overtaken his faith in the Lord, and he resorted to using the weapons of the world.

Here is the lesson for us: *never let fear make us abandon God’s methods*. Goliath’s sword had not done him any good. In fact, David used it to cut off Goliath’s head. When we face difficulties or trials or uncertainties, let us not abandon God’s methods. For example, many people want entertaining worship services and pragmatic programs. And pastors and elders who fear lack of growth give people entertainment and pragmatism. However, God’s method of growth is through the simple means of grace: prayer and the ministry of the word (cf. Acts 6:4).

C. *David Missed a Foe (21:7)*

And third, David missed a foe.

⁴ Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 365.

Verse 7 seems out of place in this story. We read, **“Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul’s herdsmen.”** That is all that is said about Doeg in this story. However, in the next chapter we learn that Doeg told Saul about what happened in Nob. The result was that Ahimelech, his family, all the other priests, and even the cattle were killed. At least, eighty-five people were killed (22:18-19). What seemed insignificant actually turned out to be disastrous for others. In fact, David later said that he knew that Doeg would tell Saul about his presence at Nob (22:22), but did nothing to intervene.

Here is the lesson: *fear may paralyze us*. We get ourselves into difficulty and we become afraid. But, rather than correct our error, we do nothing because we have become paralyzed. And such paralysis may actually hurt others really badly.

II. David Fled to Achish at Gath (21:10-15)

And second, David fled to Achish at Gath.

Verse 10 says, **“And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath.”**

Two things happened when David fled to Achish at Gath.

A. David Became Afraid (21:11-12)

First, David became afraid.

It is really puzzling why David fled to Achish the king of Gath. First, Gath was Goliath’s hometown. Goliath had been their champion. Moreover, Gath was in Philistine territory, and David had killed tens of thousands of Philistines. So, David was going into enemy territory knowing that he had not only killed their champion but also that tens of thousands of widows would not welcome him. In addition, he was carrying Goliath’s sword. It may

be that David went there hoping to curry favor with Achish. But then **the servants of Achish said to Achish, “Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances, ‘Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?’”** And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath (21:11-12). At this point, David realized that he had made a huge mistake and was terribly afraid.

Here is the lesson: *believers make mistakes that may cause them to be afraid.* Sometimes we make really big mistakes, even sinning in the process. And we become **“much afraid,”** like David. That is why God provides pastors and elders and mature Christian friends who can hear us, point us in the right direction, pray with us, and support us in our time of need.

B. David Feigned Insanity (21:13-15)

And second, David feigned insanity.

Knowing that he was not going to get a friendly reception, David **changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard** (21:13). David had stood boldly before Goliath, but now he acted like a scared madman before them. **Then Achish said to his servants, “Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?”** (21:14-15). Apparently, as we shall learn next time, this ruse worked. David was dismissed and he managed to get away from Achish.

Here is the lesson: *any believer can fall, and can fall far and fast.* Not long before, David was serving Saul faithfully. Now, he was acting like a slobbering idiot in Goliath’s home town. That is why

we should always consider both God's grace and our duty. Hebrews 3:12 warns all believers, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed David as a fugitive from Saul as set forth in 1 Samuel 21:1-15, we should trust in the Lord in all circumstances.

As I mentioned, David was able to get away from Achish, and he escaped to the cave of Adullam (22:1). Over the course of time, he no doubt reflected on this period of his life. He wrote as many as eight Psalms during his time as a fugitive from Saul (Psalms 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, and 142).

The title of Psalm 56 says that this psalm is about "when the Philistines seized him in Gath." He mentions that his attackers oppress him and trample on him. And then he affirms in verses 3-4, "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" And the answer is, of course, nothing—at least, not ultimately.

Frankly, David's visit to Achish and his flight to Achish were not his finest hour. That is why we are so thankful that David's greater Son Jesus was so unlike David when he faced his persecutors and even death. He did not speak falsehoods and he did not flee in fear from what was before him. No. Jesus went to the cross and suffered the pain and torture so that we would not have to do so. Because of Jesus, we can say with David, "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" And the answer is, of course, nothing—at least, not ultimately.

Let us then trust in the Lord in all circumstances. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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