

1 Samuel 21:1-10

David Receives Bread from the Priests of Nob

David is now an outlaw, and is fleeing from Saul's palace in Gibeah to Nob, 12 miles away, where the Tabernacle has been set up and the priests are attending to it.

Why does David lie to Ahimelech the priest? Probably so the priest would be able to say that he did not knowingly aid David as an outlaw. Instead he thinks he is on secret business for the king. Ahimelech was the great-grandson of Eli, and was an old man at this time serving as high-priest.

But Ahimelech knew about Saul's previous erratic behavior toward David, and suspected something strange was going on when someone of importance like David arrived without a retinue or a company surrounding him, and Ahimelech was therefore apprehensive when he approached.

This deception of David along with his involvement of Ahimelech, which later resulted in his death and the other priests by Saul's order, weighed heavily on David later. He admits later to Ahimelech's son Abiathar, (**1 Samuel 22:22**) - "I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father's house." And this is the sin referred to in **Psalm 119:28-29** - "My soul melteth for heaviness: strengthen thou me according unto thy word. Remove from me the way of lying: and grant me thy law graciously."

1 Samuel 21:1-2 - "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? 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."

The Jewish translation says "I troubled the young men (to advance) to a hidden, secret place."

1 Samuel 21:3-4 - "Now therefore what is under thine hand? give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present. 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."

Why didn't Ahimelech just give David ordinary bread? The residents of Nob were all priests and their families. The only bread they had was part of the tithes that Israel was commanded to give to them. It was restricted to be eaten only by priests. The outgoing shewbread from the previous week would have been slightly less of a violation, according to the rabbis.

This was the Sabbath, and the shewbread from the previous week was removed and

had to be eaten.

- **Leviticus 24:5-9** - "And thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the LORD. And thou shalt put pure frankincense upon each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, even an offering made by fire unto the LORD. Every sabbath he shall set it in order before the LORD continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. And it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place: for it is most holy unto him of the offerings of the LORD made by fire by a perpetual statute."

It was holy, so whoever ate it must be in a state of purity, clean from defilement - sex being one thing that would temporarily defile someone. (This was not because sex was bad, but because something meant for "life" - sperm - might be left over or not reach its natural goal. The same with menstrual blood, meant to nourish a fertilized egg). This kind of uncleanness would require a washing and a period of separation.

1 Samuel 21:5 - "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."

A man is obligated to have sex with his wife before leaving on a journey, so the priest's question was relevant. Were they all in a state of ritual purity?

The Hebrew in this passage is described as being difficult to translate. The young men's "vessels" refer probably to their own bodies (as in **2 Corinthians 4:7**). The bread was "in a manner common" because it had been removed from the shewbread table and was now "common" and could be eaten by the priest and his family.

The argument was that a higher law superseded any restriction on the bread - the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (**Leviticus 19:18**). The rabbis ruled that nothing stands in the way of preservation of life, but idolatry, adultery, and murder; everything else may be done for the sake of that. The implication is that David and his men had not had anything to eat for three days.

The bread would be sanctified this day "in the vessel" = *k'el* - in the "instrument," i.e. in the sense of human instrumentality, as in **Genesis 49:5; Isaiah 13:5; 32:7; Jeremiah 50:25**; comp. also **Acts 9:15**.

The bread in fact would actually become "sanctified" after being eaten by David and his companions. David perhaps subconsciously understood that his flight from Saul was a sacred mission, although he was still implying to the priest he was on a "made up" secret mission on the king's business.

In **1 Samuel 22:10** we will learn that the priest Ahimelech also "inquired of the Lord" for David at this time.

1 Samuel 21:6 - "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."

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

This incident is cited by Jesus when He and his disciples pluck ears of grain on the Sabbath day.

- **Matthew 12:1-8** - "At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day. But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice,' ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day."

When did the priests "profane the Sabbath?" When they had to bake the shewbread on the Sabbath to replace the previous week's bread. It says it is put "hot" on the table.

The Jewish commentators are divided about this. Some say the loaves were baked on the sabbath day, but the majority say that baking did not drive away the sabbath, or it was lawful on the sabbath day; but others say that they were baked on the evening of the sabbath, and kept in the oven until the time of their being set upon the table (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot, fol. 95. 2.); and, as Abarbinel observes, the mouth of the oven might be stopped up till that time to keep in the heat; but others say (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, fol. 2l. 1. Menachot, fol. 96. 2.) this heat was miraculous, and even the old bread remained hot for the whole week.

David, despite his deceiving the priest and all his other sins, was a type of Christ. Jesus said "in this place is one greater than the temple." Just as David felt his mission would "sanctify" the bread, the will and ministry and mission of Jesus superseded the rules of holiness of the Temple, because His body was the Temple (**John 2:12-22**), the New Jerusalem, the Righteousness of God, the Mercy Seat.

(See also Jesus healing on the Sabbath - **Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11**).

David in Need

There are two particular instances of David in need of sustenance. Here, although born in Beth-lechem "the house of bread," he lacks bread. (The rabbis note again that David is descended from Moab, who refused bread to Israel in the wilderness). Another time

he lacks water (2 Samuel 23:15 - "And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!")

We could compare these with Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats:

- **Matthew 25:35-36, 40** - "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me....Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

In the type of David, Jesus experienced all these. ("in prison" means "guarded, watched over" in Greek. This could be said of the fugitive David's experience with the Philistines in the last part of this chapter, as well as of Jesus under arrest before He went to the cross.)

Jesus directs us to see Himself in people in similar need. When we help them, we are helping Him.

Doeg the Edomite

1 Samuel 21:7 - "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 herdsmen that belonged to Saul."

The name "Doeg" means "the worrier." Being without faith, he was tormented by anxiety, jealousy and insecurity. He is called the "Edomite" because he was the son of an Amalekite proselyte. He also manifested all the bad attributes of Esau.

After seeing David with the high priest, Doeg the Edomite schemes against David, just as the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus after what He says about eating the grain in the field:

- **Matthew 12:14** - "Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him."

"herdsmen" = runners or messengers. But this could also be referring to his being a steward over all of Saul's herds and shepherds. Later it says Doeg was "set over the servants of Saul" as sort of a chief steward. It was a high position of trust close to Saul.

The rabbis say Doeg was the one who advised Saul not to kill Agag, basing his argument on the verse that prohibits slaughtering a parent and child on the same day (**Leviticus 22:28**). He talked up David's attributes to Saul to engender jealousy (**1 Samuel 16:18**) and challenged David's right to marry a Jewess because of his Moabite descent from Ruth. (**1 Samuel 17:58**). He is one of the few who the sages say have no portion in the World to Come. Doeg's life is also an illustration of the evil effect of gossip and slander.

Doeg later tells Saul about the priests aiding David, which brings down Saul's wrath down on the priests of Nob.

David Asks for a Weapon

1 Samuel 21:8 - "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 was continuing his pretense that he was on secret business for king Saul. The sight of Doeg raised his apprehension even more.

1 Samuel 21:9-10 - "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."

So David, who defeated Goliath with a pebble, now thinks he needs Goliath's sword. This is an indication of the state of mind he was in. His faith had apparently sunk low in his distress.

According to the rabbis, Ahimelech, who knew of Saul's previous outbursts against David, warned him that possession of the sword used to kill Goliath might stir up Saul's jealousy even more.

The Targum explains that "behind the ephod" is meant chronologically - Ahimelech brought out the sword "after he had inquired of the Lord using the ephod and the Urim and Thummim." (See **1 Samuel 23:1-12** where later David 'inquires of the Lord' several other times).

Since the sword had been preserved as a reminder of God's faithfulness in David's battle with Goliath, David could also look on it as a reminder of the same thing.

But would he?

In this story, we see many of David's weaknesses and sins on display - unbelief in God's protection, lying to Ahimelech and endangering the priests of Nob without their knowledge.

But we see why David was called "a man after God's own heart" (**1 Samuel 13:14**). He knew how to repent, and he did repent when confronted with his own sin.

Psalm 7

In **Psalm 7**, David reflects on these deeds and others that led to the death of Saul and Jonathan and set off a cycle of vendettas.

[Read Psalm 7]

The rabbis explain that the Holy One, blessed be He, said to David, "Through you, Doeg the Edomite was banished; through you, Saul and his sons were slain, etc."

The psalm begins with a superscription: "Shiggaion of David, which he sang unto the LORD, concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite"

The Sages (Midrash Ps. 7:18) explain that "Shiggaion" is an expression of error, that he confessed and prayed about the error. The rabbis say the error was that he had [committed by] reciting a song upon Saul's downfall, as it is stated (in **2 Samuel 22:1**) But it could just as easily referred to his actions here at Nob that led to the slaughter of the priests.

Who is Cush the Benjamite? In **Numbers 12:1** "Cush" is applied to Zipporah because, as the Ethiopian differed by his skin from all other men, so Zipporah by her beauty from all women. Similarly it is applied to Saul from **1 Samuel 9:2** because Kish had a son named Saul, uniquely handsome and a head taller than anyone else. Rashi: Just as a Cushite has unusual skin, so did Saul have unusual deeds. See also **Amos 9:7** - "Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?" i.e. they are unique because God gave them the law.

In **Psalm 7** David regrets taking refuge with the Philistines (see the last part of this chapter), and now says he has now taken refuge in God only, and asks God to protect him. The psalm describes his feelings as he flees from Saul.

1 Samuel 21:10 - "And David arose, and fled that day for fear of Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath."

Apparently David's companions accompanied him only to the border of Israel.

Should We Ever Flee?

But wait a minute - should David have fled at all? Shouldn't he have stayed, faced Saul and had faith that God would protect him?

Didn't Isaac allow himself to be bound, accepting his fate as in the hands of God? Daniel and his three companions stayed and were thrown into a furnace and lion's den.

Tertullian had powerful arguments against flight in the face of persecution.

See "To Flee or Not to Flee? Matthew 10:23 and Third Century Flight in Persecution"
https://brill.com/view/journals/scr/14/1/article-p133_10.xml?language=en#:~:text=Because%20persecution%20comes%20from%20God,work%20th at%20they%20kept%20moving

This question has come up a lot over the centuries.

In **2 Maccabees** the mother who had to watch her seven sons perish under torture is described and it is said that she "bore it bravely because she put her trust in the Lord." But none of them had the opportunity to flee.

Maimonides (1138–1204 A.D.), "the Rambam," writes in his "Iggeret HaShemad" ("Letter on Forced Conversion") that if Jews happen to reside in a place where there are decrees against them which call on them to give their lives, they must flee to another place. At the very least, one ought to go into hiding as did Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, or behave in a manner similar to that of Rabbi Elisha "Ba'al HaCnafayim" ("the Winged One"):

"Once, the evil Kingdom of Rome decreed that any Jew caught wearing Tefillin would have his brain pierced, yet Elisha would wear them around the market-place. One of the King's men caught sight of him and he began to run, the officer running after him. When the officer finally caught up with him, Rabbi Elisha took the Tefillin off his head and hid it in his hand. The man asked him, 'What's that you have in your hand?' 'Dove wings,' said the Rabbi. He then opened up his hand and - lo and behold - dove wings! Therefore he is called "Ba'al HaCnafayim." (Shabbat 130b)

Rabbinic texts counseled Jews to disguise themselves as non-Jews in order to avoid being martyred, and to use other tricks, ambiguous language and double meanings to escape persecution. Rabbi Yose says in the Talmud that it is better for teachers of Torah to withdraw than be killed prematurely and cease doing the Lord's work. But from the rabbinic period onwards, martyrdom became defined as the sanctification of the Name of the Lord.

Jesus told believers in the end times:

- **Matthew 24:15-17** - "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination of desolation,' described by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop come down to retrieve anything from his house..."

- **Matthew 10:23** - "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

Jesus' family fled Herod and went into Egypt (**Matthew 2:13-23**). Paul was let down in a basket from the walls of Damascus (**Acts 9:25**). Cyprian the bishop of Carthage was criticized for fleeing during the persecution of Emperor Decius in 250 A.D.

- **Proverbs 22:3** - "A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished."

When Jesus knew that the Pharisees had "taken counsel together to put him to death"...

- **John 11:54** - "Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples."

i.e. Jesus was hiding out, knowing it was not His time yet.

Discretion is sometimes the better part of valor. (Falstaff in *Henry IV, part 1*)

It's best we not second-guess someone else's decision.

God establishes the right time for fleeing or for standing our ground. But when the time comes, the Spirit gives us the courage to face suffering or even martyrdom for our faith.

By reading this story of David as a hunted fugitive, we get a sense of the emotions of Jesus in the Garden of Gethseme as the plots and schemes against Him were coming to a climax in His trial and crucifixion.