

David Seeks Provision from Ahimelech and Protection from Achish

1 Samuel 21

1 Samuel 21 - *"Now David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech was afraid when he met David, and said to him, 'Why are you alone, and no one is with you?'"* ² So David said to Ahimelech the priest, *"The king has ordered me on some business, and said to me, 'Do not let anyone know anything about the business on which I send you, or what I have commanded you.' And I have directed my young men to such and such a place."* ³ Now therefore, what have you on hand? Give me five loaves of bread in my hand, or whatever can be found."

⁴ And the priest answered David and said, *"There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread, if the young men have at least kept themselves from women."* ⁵ Then David answered the priest, and said to him, *"Truly, women have been kept from us about three days since I came out. And the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in effect common, even though it was consecrated in the vessel this day."* ⁶ So the priest gave him holy bread; for there was no bread there but the showbread which had been taken from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place on the day when it was taken away.

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 chief of the herdsmen who belonged to Saul. ⁸ And David said to Ahimelech, *"Is there not here on hand a spear or a sword? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste."* ⁹ So the priest said, *"The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, there it is, wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it. For there is no other except that one here."* And David said, *"There is none like it; give it to me."*

¹⁰ Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath. ¹¹ And the servants of Achish said to him, *"Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'"* ¹² Now David took these words to heart, and was very much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. ¹³ So he changed his behavior before them, pretended madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard. ¹⁴ Then Achish said to his servants, *"Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me? "* ¹⁵ Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"

Background Notes

In 1 Samuel 20 David made the painful decision to become a fugitive and to leave his wife, his home and his position in the royal court because King Saul continued to threaten his life. David and a few men who joined him went to Nob, a few miles south of Gibeah, where the Tabernacle was located at this time.

Apparently at some time after the Philistines captured the Ark (1 Samuel 4), the Philistines overran Shiloh was overrun by the Philistines, and the Tabernacle and community of priests were moved to Nob. However, the Ark of the Covenant was not in the Tabernacle at this time. It remained in the town of Kiriath Jearim, after it was brought back from the land of the Philistines (1 Samuel 6).

When David came to Nob, at first Ahimelech (the high priest) was afraid, not knowing what David was up to. When David asked for food, Ahimelech gave him the leftover “showbread” – the special bread that was set out before the Lord on the golden table in the Tabernacle. Normally, only the priests ate this bread, according to the Law in Leviticus 24. But in this case the preservation of David’s life was more important than the ceremonial regulation. So the priest gave David and his men the bread on the condition that they were ceremonially clean.

The Lord commented on this event in Matthew 12:1-4, when the Pharisees found fault with the disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath: *“At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” ³ But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?”* Our Lord’s point was that moral obligations in life supersede civil or ceremonial regulations. A good application of this biblical principle today might be something like, “It’s permissible to break the speed limit when you’re trying to get a severely injured child or a woman who is about to deliver her baby to the hospital.” Normally we don’t break the speed limit, but there are times when we would break the speed limit because of higher moral obligations.

Notice -- the Bible is **not** teaching here that it’s ever OK to break God’s moral laws. No! However, we may on occasion find it necessary to break the ceremonial laws or civil laws, and only when higher moral obligations demand it.

Doctrinal Points

1. The testimony of believers is compromised when they lie to fellow believers.

David lied to the high priest Ahimelech twice in this chapter. Verse 2: *“The king has ordered me on some business, and said to me, ‘Do not let anyone know anything about the business on which I send you, or what I have commanded you.’”* That was a lie. Verse 8: *“And David said to Ahimelech, “Is there not here on hand a spear or a sword? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king’s business required haste.”* That was another lie.

Were these lies justified? No. Lying is a moral law, and lying is never justified. Lying is not a ceremonial matter, but a moral matter. Leviticus 19:11 says, *“Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another.”*

Notice that when the Lord commented on this event in Matthew 12, he didn’t condone David’s lies. The Lord’s point was that David and his men were in desperate need of bread, and so they were not wrong in eating the leftover, consecrated

bread of the Tabernacle, even though under ceremonial law that bread was to be eaten only by the priests. But the Lord never condoned David's lies.

Just as David's lie in 1 Samuel 20 almost resulted in Jonathan's death, so here in 1 Samuel 21, David's lies led to sad consequences. One of Saul's servants, Doeg, an Edomite, was at the Tabernacle that day and saw David. 1 Samuel 22:9-11 tells us that Doeg gave this information to King Saul: *"I saw the son of Jesse going to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. ¹⁰ And he inquired of the LORD for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."*

As a result of Ahimelech helping David, Saul had the whole town of Nob wiped out. Eighty-five priests, women and children and animals were struck down with the sword. Only one priest escaped -- Abiathar, Ahimelech's son. How tragic! And it all came about because of David's lie! And David admitted to it. 1 Samuel 22:22: *"I have caused the death of all the persons of your father's house."* David had to live with this tragedy on his conscience for the rest of his days, and it certainly detracted from his testimony as a man of God.

Has a fellow believer ever lied to you? It can be a devastating experience. From that moment on, that fellow believer's testimony as a Christian is greatly compromised, if not worthless, as far as you're concerned. What about our own testimonies? Are we involved in any lies with fellow believers? Ephesians 4:25 says, *"Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another."* The testimony of believers is compromised when they lie to fellow believers.

2. The testimony of believers is compromised when they turn to the world for security.

(v10-15) *"Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath....¹² Now David.... was very much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. ¹³ So he changed his behavior before them, pretended madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard."*

Is this the same David that we read about in 1 Samuel 17? The young man who killed Goliath the Philistine? Now he's running to the enemy camp (of all places) for security! And then he pretends to be crazy so the Philistines will think that he is harmless as an enemy. What a comedown for David! Think of him scratching on the gate and letting his saliva run down his beard. How sad!

Suppose, at this point, David were to say, "Trust in the Lord in your times of trouble. The Lord is our refuge and strength." That testimony would certainly sound a little hollow and compromised.

Do you see the spiritual lesson for us? Just as David's testimony was compromised when he turned to the Philistines for security, so our testimony is compromised when we turn to the world for security. When we say that we fully trust the Lord to take care of us and protect us, but then we constantly worry about the future or our economic security, we are like David in the camp of the Philistines. Trusting the Lord with our words, but turning to the world for our security! The world

and its unbelieving people see us as totally inconsistent -- even insane! The testimony of believers is compromised when they turn to the world for security.

Practical Application

Let's learn from our mistakes.

Did David learn from his mistakes? Did he learn from his mistake of running in fear for his life to ask the Philistines for security, instead of trusting in the Lord? Did he learn from that mistake? Yes. How do we know? Read Psalm 34. Psalm 34 was written soon after David's experience here in 1 Samuel 21.

Now read Psalm 4 and notice what David says in verses 7-8. Read the whole Psalm. It's hard to miss the point that David learned from his mistakes.

Unfortunately, when we get to 1 Samuel 27, we find that David had a relapse in faith. He returned to the Philistines, and temporarily forgot a lot of what he had learned. This can happen to us, too. When we learn from our mistakes (although that doesn't condone our mistakes), we will hopefully make fewer mistakes in our future walk of faith. Learning from our mistakes doesn't guarantee that we won't make the same mistakes again – but let's learn from our mistakes!