

THE MORNING OF THE MONARCHY  
STUDIES IN FIRST SAMUEL  
LESSON 9

**"WHEN WRONG IS ON THE THRONE"**  
**I Samuel 21 and 22**

**I. DAVID, THE ANOINTED KING GIVEN THE HOLY BREAD AT NOB 21:1-6**

**A. His Flight to Nob 21:1**

**1. The Place**

Broken-hearted both from being hated by Saul and from having to leave Jonathan, David fled to Nob. This "city of priests" (22:19) was in Benjamite territory halfway between Gibeah and Jerusalem. Since the capture of the ark and its return by the Philistines, the tabernacle has not been mentioned until this chapter. Neither has Nob been mentioned before. It is possible that the Shiloh sanctuary had been destroyed or desecrated by the Philistines (see Ps. 78:60; Jer. 7:12-14; 26:9). Neither Shiloh nor Nob was intended to be the center of Israelite worship. The disasters that befell these two sanctuaries may well have paved the way for Jerusalem to become the home of the ark and the temple.

**2. The Circumstances**

David was probably no more than twenty years old when he was forced to leave Saul's palace (which was now his own home, too). Earlier David had sought sanctuary with Samuel and now he sought it with Ahimelech (also known as Ahijah -- 14:3), the priest at Nob (21:1). This is the first of fifteen episodes in the story of David's flight from Saul.

Returning to his childhood homeland, the wilderness area of Judah, David lived out a Robin Hood existence for nearly ten years. This period of time is reckoned from the fact that David was thirty when he began to rule over Judah at Hebron (2 Sam. 5:4) following the death of Saul (2 Sam. 2:4-11). From now on David was considered a fugitive and an outlaw. The political and military strength lay in Saul's hands, and for David, there seemed to be no asylum, not even at the sanctuary. Under Israelite law and procedure, David seemed to have no protection. However, God protected David for He had destined him for the kingship. David did not expect asylum nor did he ask for it and Ahimelech's fear indicates that he suspected the danger to both David and himself. (Some believe the fear here is awe of David as the anointed king and an unconscious paying of homage to him.) David would not have been human if he had not been afraid. David lied that he had come on behalf of Saul on a mission demanding utmost secrecy.

**B. His Request for Bread 21:2-6**

**1. The Need**

Hungry from his flight (some texts add "about these three days" -- KJV) David asked for bread, but there was no ordinary bread. All that the priest had was the holy showbread (Ex. 25:30) which had been on the Table of the Presence and now had been replaced with fresh bread (21:6; cf. Lev. 24:5-9). In view of the size of the settlement (22:18-19), the lack of ordinary bread is puzzling.

**2. The Bread**

Ordinarily, as Jesus suggested in Matthew 12:3-4, this bread, even though now made common by being replaced with fresh bread, could only be eaten by the priests. The Talmud says that, as this bread had laid on the table for a week, it was stale and dry, and the priests actually ate little of it. Perhaps by this time the law had been interpreted in such a way to allow any who were ceremonially pure to eat the bread (21:3-4; Lev. 15:18). David assured Ahimelech that, as always on military expeditions, he and his men fulfilled this requirement, so the priest gave David the bread of the Presence. We may also read here that this sacred bread is appropriate for the chosen king. A similar token is given to Saul after his anointing (1 Sam. 10:4-5). Jesus' use of this passage may suggest that He was not only arguing on the basis of a precedent, but that He was also pointing to Himself as the new David, the new chosen King.

### 3. The Principle

David's eating illustrated a concession and an important principle -- that life is more holy than bread; people are more important than ritual (Mt. 12:7-8). In giving David and his men the bread, the priest was breaking the letter of the Law but not the spirit of the Law. What Jesus was saying in His day (Mk. 2:23-28), in addition to invoking the above principle, was a matter both of precedent and Person -- that if David could do it and it was all right, there is One here greater than David, and He can do it also. David ate the showbread because he had need. Christ is saying that human need supersedes all ritual and ceremonial laws.

### 4. The Question of the Deception

David had lied to Ahimelech and seemed to take things into his own hands here instead of waiting for God's protection. God still graciously provided and protected him by making an exception of the consecrated bread. God can use the family, religion, the political process, and/or our enemies to bring about His cause.

One must never judge a man without taking account of his circumstances. Our judgment of David must be tempered by the fact that he was in a desperate circumstance. The purpose of this passage is not to point out his failings, but to portray the extremity of David's plight. We must follow the example of Christ Whose only comment on this episode was to justify David's use of sacred bread in view of his desperate need for food (Mk. 2:25f). But we must question his behavior in three respects:

#### a. Deceit

He lied to the priest.

#### b. Selfishness

Thinking only of his own need, he thoughtlessly put Ahimelech in great danger. (David later admitted to this in 22:21-22.)

#### c. Faithlessness

Contrast this event to his courageous faith when confronting Goliath. Yesterday's faith does not guarantee today's trust and faithfulness.

## C. David Spots Doeg, the Edomite 21:7

Doeg the Edomite is briefly introduced here because of his future part in the story. He was the chief over Saul's shepherds, and as the herds would have been a major part of Saul's wealth, that would have been an important position. It is generally assumed that Doeg was detained in the sanctuary under some priestly discipline, either to make a guilt offering, pay a vow or become a proselyte. The Edomites, descendants of Esau, were a continuous thorn in the Israelites' flesh.

## II. DAVID GIVEN GOLIATH'S SWORD 21:8-9

David immediately knew that Doeg spelled trouble and asked for arms, alleging that in the haste of setting out on the king's business, he had forgotten his own. Ahimelech gave him Goliath's sword which was laid up in the sanctuary. In 1 Samuel 17:54 Goliath's sword was taken by David as his private property, but it would have been natural for the young hero to give it to the sanctuary as a thank offering to God. The implication is that the coming king is to be armed with a sword of unparalleled quality.

## III. DAVID FORCED TO FLEE TO GATH 21:10-15

### A. The Place 21:10

David immediately fled for his life and, throwing all caution to the winds, fled to Gath, the home of Goliath. Gath was a major Philistine capital on the border standing on a white chalk cliff. It was a frontier fortress guarding the high road leading from the Judean wheat fields.

### B. The Problem 21:11-12

Achish, the lord of Gath, recognized him. (Achish is called "Abimelech," probably a royal title, in the heading of Psalm 34.) David had gained an enormous reputation as an Israelite soldier. To have taken refuge among the Philistines and to wear the very sword of their dead champion was the act of an incredibly brave or reckless man, a true madman or one so desperate that he was not

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thinking straight. Some regard the story as straining credibility, or as one puts it, "the sword episode is not without its humor." However, David was driven by the need to evade Saul. Where better than a Philistine city? He may have thought that since he was now an enemy to Saul he would be accepted there. It is interesting that the Philistines recognized David somewhat prematurely as king of the land because they had heard the song of the people.

### C. The Pretense 21:13-15

David pretended to be insane and thus was not harmed. It was the practice of the ancient world to regard the insane as being in some sense an evil omen. They were not harmed lest the gods be provoked. So David put on an act. Shakespeare's Hamlet had to do the same thing to keep from being slain. David's act was good and Achish, king of Gath, believed it. Fear was the cause of David's deceit, both of Ahimelech and Achish. It was a basic human reaction to frightening circumstances, but the believer can overcome it by a deepening trust in God.

*The story, like so many Old Testament narratives, is to be read at two levels. At one, it is a straightforward story of the fugitive David, skillfully getting food and a weapon for himself from the innocent priest. At the other, it shows how the priest of Saul himself acknowledges the coming king, offering protection and help, and it points the way into another event, the slaughter at Nob, which shows how unsuited Saul is for the royal position.*

-- Payne, 1 and 2 Samuel

## IV. DAVID AND HIS MEN GATHERED AT THE CAVE OF ADULLAM 22:1-2

Adullam was an area about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem and ten miles northeast of Gath. In Adullam David took residence in a cave along with 400 other men who were distressed, debtors and discontents, and thus were refugees. He became a natural focus for dissidents in Judah and many who joined him had good reason to be discontented. Verses 4 and 5 speak of the "stronghold"; it has been much debated whether this word refers also to the cave. Had Saul's government been just and upright, David would have had no followers, but Saul never rose above the level of self-will. According to Josephus, Adullam was situated near a city of the same name which formed one of a group of fifteen in the southern desert. The site of the city Adullam has been recovered by archaeologists. On the south side of a ravine stood a high rounded hill, almost isolated by valleys and covered with ruins, a natural fortress.

*The sides of the tributary valley are lined with rows of caves, and these we found inhabited, and full of flocks and herds; but still more interesting was the discovery of a separate cave on the hill itself, a low, smoke-blackened burrow, which was the home of a single family. We could not but suppose that our feet were standing in the very footprints of the shepherd king, who here, encamped between the Philistines and the Jews, covered the line of advance on the cornfields of Keilah, and was but three miles distant from the thickets of Hareth...about 500 feet high... . There is ample room to have accommodated David's 400 men in the caves, and they are, as we have seen, still inhabited.*

-- The Pulpit Commentary

Among the 400 would have been men like Joab and his brothers Abishai and Asahel. While at Adullam, David was able to inspire such love and enthusiasm among the 400 that three of his heroes broke through a garrison of the Philistines at Bethlehem to bring David water from the well there (2 Sam. 23:13-17).

## V. DAVID PERMITTED TO REMOVE HIS FAMILY TO MOAB 22:3-5

Meantime, sensing a threat to his own family, David took his mother and father to Moab, perhaps to live among the kinfolk of his own great-grandmother, Ruth. The family was a vital and important unit in Israelite society, so it was natural that they would have supported him. However, they were in danger of Saul's attacking them simply because they were related to David.

David was becoming much more than a mere fugitive from justice. In moving his parents to Moab, he had to have special permission from the king of Moab. So we see him beginning to act like a king, though a king in exile, in making that political negotiation. It is at this juncture that we first meet the prophet Gad, who told David that his place was not at Adullam but in Judah. The mention of the prophet Gad is equally significant; lone individuals did not have their own prophets. One cannot help but notice the implied contrast: Saul had lost all prophetic support, but David already has a prophet to advise him.

So David went to the forest of Hereth, east of Adullam, in Judah, to be among his own people. The locations of Mizpah of Moab and the forest of Hereth are unknown.

## VI. AHIMELECH BETRAYED BY DOEG 22:6-19

### A. Saul

Meanwhile Saul was taking the keenest interest in David's movements. Saul swore at the men of Benjamin, reminded them on which side their bread was buttered and challenged them to say why no one told him what David and his men were doing. Doeg volunteered what he had seen at Nob and Saul summoned Ahimelech and his priests to appear before him, and he accused Ahimelech of conspiring with David against him. Saul had again shown himself unfit to reign.

*A king must be able to recognize the truth when he hears it (1 Ki. 3:16-28). He must act with due restraint and control of his powers. He must promote justice; and if injustice has to be punished, he must not pronounce vindictive and brutal verdicts.*  
(Payne)

### B. Ahimelech

Ahimelech now proved to be a man of courage, integrity and honor. He admitted all the actions of which he stood accused, denying only the motives. A lesser man would have attacked David for his duplicity, but Ahimelech chose to challenge the king's attitude to David.

### C. Doeg

In his paranoia Saul concluded that Ahimelech and the other priests were conspirators against him and ordered them slain. Only Doeg was willing to undertake the assignment. He killed the 85 priests, and, going back to Nob (was he bitter about the detention?) killed their families (except for one son) and their livestock. David was joined by the son who escaped, Abiathar. This marked the beginning of David's priestly staff which would later lead the tabernacle worship in Jerusalem.

### D. David

David was helpless to prevent the massacre or to intervene. But when told of it, he admitted his fault and accepted the blame (not putting it on Saul) and he solemnly undertook to protect the lone survivor. Apparently, Abiathar recognized that David had intended no harm to the priesthood and was confident that David would look after him.

### E. Abiathar

Abiathar was probably left in charge of the sanctuary when Ahimelech and the rest were summoned into the king's presence, and on news being brought of Saul's massacre, made his escape. Naturally, as representing a family who had suffered so much for David (though originally Saul's friends), he was kindly received, and a friendship began which lasted all of David's life.

### F. Jonathan

Curiously enough, Jonathan disappears from the story, apart from 23:16 and then his death with Saul at Mount Gilboa (31:2). The story is told from David's point of view.

## CONCLUSION

*During these years when he hides from the presence of Saul who seeks to kill him, he is hunted and hounded. He is driven from pillar to post. He is forced to hide in the forests and caves of the earth to escape the king's wrath. During this time David describes himself in the following ways: (1) I am hunted like a partridge (1 Sam. 26:20); (2) I am like a pelican of the wilderness (Ps. 102:6); (3) I am like an owl of the desert (Ps. 102:6); (4) My soul is among lions (Ps. 57:4); and (5) They have prepared a net for my steps (Ps. 57:6). David becomes weary during these years of running away from Saul. When Saul presses him hard, he withdraws to the cave of Adullam which is a rocky mountain fastness, southwest of Jerusalem, in a valley between Philistia and Hebron.*  
– McGee

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 10

READ LESSON 9.

1. What principle did Jesus emphasize by speaking of David and the Bread of the Presence?
2. What was of interest or new to you in Lesson 9?

READ CHAPTER 23.

3. How did David inquire of the Lord? (See vs. 6, 9-11)
4. (a) What circumstance led Saul to think that God had given David into his hands? (Compare verses 7 and 14). (b) Are circumstances a good indicator of God's will?
5. By how many men had David's band grown?
6. What kind of encouragement did Jonathan give David?

READ CHAPTER 24.

7. (a) Why did David not kill Saul? (b) Why did his conscience bother him in verses 3-7?
8. What evidence did David give Saul that he meant him no harm?
9. (a) How does David refer to himself in v. 14? (b) What do you think he meant by the statement?
10. Do you think Saul was truly repentant in 24:16-21?
11. (a) Did David and his men think Saul was repentant? (b) Why do you think that?
12. What practical lessons can you learn from David's actions and words in this chapter?