

1 Samuel Chapter 21

Verses 21:1 – 22:22: “Nob” was located between Jerusalem and Gibeah. It had become the center for Israelite worship after the destruction of Shiloh. David’s deceit would cause the death of “Ahimelech” and all the other priests there. Scripture records the good and the bad of its heroes so people can learn from both.

1 Samuel 21:1 "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?"

“Nob”: “The city of priests” (22:19). The priests dwelt on Mt. Scopus, about one mile northeast of Jerusalem. David went there for necessary supplies and for comfort and counsel.

“Ahimelech”: A great grandson of Eli (1:9), who is possibly the brother of Ahijah (14:3; 22:11), or Abimelech may be another name for Ahijah. Not only is there a rejected king on the throne (15:26-29), but also a disqualified priest (2:30-36) (see note on Mark 2:26).

"Nob" means a knoll or a hill. It is believed to be just out of Jerusalem. Ahimelech suspected something was wrong, when he saw that David was by himself. He was probably afraid of Saul. Saul did see to it that sacrifices and offerings were made, but he was not as respectful of the priesthood as he should have been. Saul had a form of religion. His belief in the LORD did not, however, keep him from his own will.

1 Samuel 21:2 "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."

David’s lie is not condoned by the Scriptures. Lying and deception are never portrayed as an acceptable life-style for the believer. The incident is recorded merely as historical fact. The incident was to bring on tragic consequences for the “priest,” his family, and the citizens of Nob (22:6-19), and to cause “David” great personal grief.

“The king hath commanded me”: David, fearing someone might tell Saul where he was, deceived Ahimelech the priest into thinking that he was on official business for the king. He supposed, as many do, that it is excusable to lie for the purpose of saving one’s life. But what is essentially sinful can never, because of circumstances, change its immoral character (compare Psalm 119:29). David’s lying led tragically to the deaths of the priests (22:9-18).

I would assume the reason he gave this excuse was to save the life of Ahimelech, if Saul found out about him helping David. Some of this David has made up, but most of it is probably true. The Scripture does not go into detail about this but David's men will join him later on. Perhaps, Jonathan got word to them, or perhaps David had gotten word to them earlier. David is on secret

business, and in a sense the King was the cause of him going on this secret mission. He was trying to get away from the king. He has twisted the truth in this particular instance.

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

Meaning, what food had he in his house?

"Give me five loaves of bread in mine hand": To take with him, for him and his servants in such a place.

"Or what there is present": Or to be found in the tabernacle; if not five loaves, two, or three, or four, or what food whatsoever he had by him.

To travel and not be seen of Saul's men, David will need food. David is saying; give me whatever bread you have convenient.

Verses 4-5: The "holy bread" was only to be eaten by the priests, and only in a holy place (Lev. 24:9), but Ahimelech knew this was a time to put mercy before ceremonial law. Jesus agreed with his decision (Luke 6:3-5).

1 Samuel 21:4 "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."

"Hallowed bread": This is consecrated bread that was set apart for use in the tabernacle to be eaten only by the priest (Exodus 25:30; Lev. 24:5-9). Ahimelech sought the Lord and received approval (22:10), when he recognized that his spiritual obligation to preserve David's life superseded the ceremonial regulation concerning who could eat the consecrated bread (see Matt. 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-26).

"Kept themselves at least from women": Though this was not a spiritual mission or religious journey, David and his men were ceremonially clean (see Exodus 19:15).

This bread had been kept before the Lord on the table for 7 days and now, it was permissible for the priests to eat it. The request of David for the food could not be denied because of the greatness of David in the sight of God and men. We do know that David had not been with a woman in three days, because he had been lying in the field waiting for the signal from Jonathan. The keeping themselves from women for a period of time, meant they were ceremonially clean.

Verses 5-6: Because the "priest" assumed that "David" was telling the truth regarding a special royal mission and the ritual purity of his soldiers, and because the moral necessity to preserve

life took precedence over the ceremonial laws concerning the “showbread” (Lev. 24:5-9). He gave the holy “bread” to David and his “men” (compare Matt. 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-27).

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."

“The vessels”: A euphemism for the bodies of the young men (as in 1 Thess. 4:4).

David was possibly speaking of himself in this. He probably did not even have any food, when he was waiting the three days in the field. Jonathan did not dare bring him any, for fear of someone finding out where he was going when he met with David. At this point, David would have been very hungry. The bread had served its religious purposes while it was in the presence of God. Now, it will be eaten by men who are not perfect, like the priests were not perfect. In a sense, it is for common use.

1 Samuel 21:6 "So the priest gave him hallowed [bread]: for there was no bread there but the showbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away."

“Hallowed bread”: Since that bread was no longer on the Lord’s table, having been replaced by hot bread, it was to be eaten by the priest and in these exigencies, by David under the law of necessity and mercy (see note on 21:4). The removal of the old bread and the replacing with new was done on the Sabbath (Lev. 24:8).

It appears from this, that the bread had been taken out from before the Lord the day before, to place fresh bread before the Lord. It really does not matter. David was the chosen of God and he was very hungry. God provided for the children of Israel as they came across the wilderness. He is providing for David here, in a most unusual way.

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 herdmen that [belonged] to Saul."

“Doeg, an Edomite”: The head shepherd of Saul’s herd, who witnessed the encounter between David and Ahimelech and told Saul (22:9-10), had embraced the Hebrew religion and was at the tabernacle, perhaps detained because it was the Sabbath and he could not travel.

"Doeg means fearful. He must have been fearful of Saul. This Edomite seemed to be in charge of everything that belonged to Saul. It would not have been a natural thing for him to be at the same place as David. David had possibly hoped this would be a time, when no one was there. Doeg sees David and goes to tell Saul that Ahimelech has helped him. This is a terrible thing.

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."

This he asked after he had given him some of the loaves of the showbread .

"And is there not here under thine hand spear or sword?": Any weapon, meaning in the tabernacle, and in his keeping, and at his disposal; he knew the sword of Goliath was there, and perhaps had a principal view to it, and put this question in order to get that in his possession.

"For I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me": Neither his sword, nor any part of his armor, but was come quite naked and unarmed and, as he pretended.

"Because the king's business required haste": Still continuing his lie; whereas the true reason was, he was let down in haste by his wife through a window of his house, and could not stay to take his armor with him. And had lain hidden for some time, and passed incognito from place to place without armor, that he might be the less known and observed.

David did not even have the simplest of weapons with him. He needed a sword and a spear badly. David had left in haste, to keep the king from killing him.

1 Samuel 21:9 "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."

"The sword of Goliath": The sword which David had used to behead Goliath in the valley of Elah (17:51), was kept in the place for storing the sacred vestments ("the ephod"), deposited there as a memorial to divine goodness in the deliverance of Israel.

"The ephod" (see notes on 2:18, 28; 14:3).

We remember that David brought this sword to the tabernacle, after he had killed Goliath. This would be David's sword anyway. Perhaps, he had left it as an offering to the Lord. This sword and possibly the armor of this Philistine were kept here. The armor would have been too large, but the sword would work just fine. The ephod was in a very special place, so the sword had been given a special place as well. David does take the sword. He feels that it is a very special sword.

Verses 21:10 – 22:2: David wrote Psalm 34 and 56 in response to this incident.

Verses 10-15: David's actions are again accurately recorded, but without comment or commendation.

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

“Achish the king of Gath”: One of the kings or lords of the Philistines (see notes on 4:1; 5:8 for Gath). This seemed to be a dangerous place to go, since David was their greatest enemy and carried Goliath’s sword into the giant’s hometown.

David never dreamed that Saul would attack the priests for them helping him. He thought Saul had more respect for the LORD than to attack the priests. He did feel that since he had been seen, Saul would follow after him to kill him. He fled to Gath. Gath was the first town on the Philistine border. Gath had a reputation for huge men like Goliath. Achish was the king of Gath at the time of Saul's persecution of David.

1 Samuel 21:11 "And the servants of Achish said unto him, [Is] not this David the king of the land? did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?"

“The “servants of Achish” call David “king,” but they were probably referring to his popularity and success rather than the office of king.

They lived so close, they had heard of the songs the women sang about David. Truly, David had been a fierce opponent of theirs. We are not told here, but Achish probably admired David for his bravery in fighting Goliath. It was not unheard of for a foreigner to be accepted. Doeg was an Edomite and yet Saul had him over all of his stock.

1 Samuel 21:12 "And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath."

Pondered upon them, and thought them over in his mind, finding that he was known, and his character also, and considered with himself what might be the consequence of this.

"And was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath": Lest he should be set against him, and be prevailed upon by his servants to take away his life, or deliver him up into the hands of Saul.

Even though David was momentarily safe with Achish, he still feared he would turn on him and kill him.

1 Samuel 21:13 "And he changed his behavior before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard."

“Changed his behavior”: David feared for his life, lacked trust in God to deliver him, and feigned insanity to persuade Achish to send him away. See the titles of Psalms 34 and 56. Drooling in one’s beard was considered in the East an intolerable indignity, as was spitting in another’s beard.

Here is the man after God's own heart, acting like a madman to try and work his way out of trouble. Such behavior could typify anyone who falls out of fellowship with God.

Superstitious people are afraid of those classified as mad. This means that David pretended to not be able to distinguish between things. He was acting as if he were mad. "Scrabbled" in this particular instance, is speaking of him drumming his fingers endlessly against the doors. He seemed even unable to handle the spittle in his mouth. He let it drip down on his chin. This would indicate that he had lost control of himself.

1 Samuel 21:14 "Then said Achish unto his servants, Lo, ye see the man is mad: wherefore [then] have ye brought him to me?"

Then said Achish to his servants, lo, you see the man is mad, which he said, as willing his servants should think so; and therefore, rather the object of their pity rather than their rage and malice. Or as really believing he was so, which he and they might conclude not merely from these his actions, before described, which they might judge real and not feigned. But they might suppose this was truly his case, brought upon him by the ill usage of Saul, who pursuing him from place to place, and sending after him to take away his life, had really brought him to distraction. And this they might rather conclude from his coming to Gath, an enemy's country, and whose champion he had slain, and many others of them; which it might be thought no man in his senses would have done.

"Wherefore then have ye brought him to me?" For if he was brought so he could be employed in Achish's service he seemed unfit for it; whether in the camp, or in the court. And if to be tried and condemned as an enemy, since he was a madman, he was rather to be pitied.

1 Samuel 21:15 "Have I need of mad men, that ye have brought this [fellow] to play the mad man in my presence? shall this [fellow] come into my house?"

Or fools, do I want them? Have not I enough of them already at my court? I want wise men, and not fools and madmen. The Jews say that the wife and daughter of Achish were mad; that while David was playing the fool and madman without, they were acting the same part within; so that Achish had enough of that sort of diversion. If it was to be reckoned such; as it was according to the taste of some persons, who used, as in later so in earlier times, to keep fools in their houses to make them sport. But Achish had enough of that, and too much, at least needed no more.

"That ye have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence?" Or act the part of a fool before me.

"Shall this fellow come into mine house?" Court or palace, and have a post there? You need be in no pain about it; he is neither agreeable to me, nor fit for any. And therefore Achish drove him away as a fool or madman, instead of imprisoning him as an enemy, or taking away his life. (see the title of Psalm 34).

David has succeeded in making the king believe he is mad. They had a strange belief that madmen were not to be interfered with, because of their relation to a deity. Achish had them to take him away but not to harm him in any way. He will set him free.

1 Samuel Chapter 21 Questions

1. Where did David go for help?
2. Who was the priest David talked with?
3. What question did he ask David?
4. What does "Nob" mean?
5. Saul did see that the _____ and _____ were made.
6. He had a _____ of religion.
7. What was more important to Saul, than his belief in the LORD?
8. What reason did David give the priest for being alone?
9. Why did the author believe he gave this excuse?
10. What are some of the possibilities of why David's men join him later?
11. How many loaves of bread did David ask for?
12. How did the priest answer David?
13. What would make it alright for David to eat this bread?
14. How long had the bread been on the table before the LORD?
15. How do we know that David had not been with a woman for three days?
16. What did the keeping of themselves from a woman for a period of time, make them?
17. What does David say about the bread, after he tells Ahimelech that he is ceremonially clean?
18. So the priest gave him _____ bread.
19. When had this bread, probably, been removed from the table before the LORD?
20. Who was the Edomite, who kept Saul's herds?
21. What does "Doeg" mean?

22. What terrible thing does Doeg do?
23. What does David ask Ahimelech for in verse 8?
24. What was the only sword he had?
25. Where had it been kept?
26. How did David feel about this weapon?
27. Why did David leave Nob?
28. Where did he go?
29. Was he recognized by the Philistines?
30. Who was king of Gath?
31. When David became fearful, what did he do?
32. What effect did this have on Achish?
33. What was their strange belief about those who were mad?