

Chapter 3

David the Fugitive

For reading: 1 Samuel chapters 20, 21 and 22.

At the end of chapter 19 we find David hiding from Saul who had finally flipped out and was determined to kill David. Chapter 20 provides detailed information of how David and Jonathan struggle with this new political situation – especially Jonathan.

We'll just focus on some of the key elements of this narrative to see what can be learnt from them.

Jonathan was torn in his loyalties between David and his father. (1 Sam 20:1, 2). We can sympathise with Jonathan. He had brought David into the household so to speak, way back when he gave David his robe, belt, and weapons in the valley of Elah after David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam 18:3, 4). Jonathan was also fiercely loyal to his father – as one of Saul's best warriors and the presumed next king of the land. Now he was placed in the position where he had to choose. Jonathan solicited from David the promise that he (David) would not eliminate Jonathan's family once he was in power (1 Sam 20:14, 15). This may indicate that Jonathan also thought that David might be the next king, not he.

David and Jonathan came up with a scheme to test Saul's intention and obtain irrefutable proof of his desire to eliminate David as a potential rival for the kingship. In keeping with the lunar calendar, the Feast of the New Moon was celebrated at the beginning of every month (see also Numbers 28). During this multi-day feast the key persons in the kingdom would be hosted by the king – as we see from the seating arrangement described in 1 Sam 20:25.

David's place remained empty, and when Saul enquired on the second day as to the reason why, Jonathan came up with the story he and David had planned. Saul lost his temper and after swearing at Jonathan, he tried to kill him too. Saul also clearly identified to Jonathan that David is his (Jonathan's) rival in the question of who would be the next king (verse 31).

For pause and reflection: It would seem that David and Jonathan concocted a good plan to get at the truth of Saul's intentions, given the political situation. What appears to be missing from the narrative is bringing the problem to God in prayer.

Sometimes we, too, face difficult situations, and we, too, like David and Jonathan, try to solve the problem by ourselves. Reflect on your own situation – especially in the current pandemic situation. Are you trying to copy David and Jonathan?

Jonathan conveyed the result of their verification plan to David through the archery incident.

David was now truly a fugitive.

This episode on David's life could well be titled "The Rise and Fall of David". He rose from a shepherd to be one of the most admired heroes of the people, friends with the king's son and married to the king's daughter. He did everything the king had asked of him, and more. He had shown no disloyalty to Saul at any time during this period. And yet – he was now an outcast, running for his life.

Read 1 Samuel chapters 21 and 22 again to refresh the memory.

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In chapter 21 we see David behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with the man we have been following so far. From the first encounter with Goliath, throughout his warrior time, David appeared as a man of integrity. His actions, violent as they may have been (1 Sam 18:27), were straight-forward and nothing devious about them.

But in his flight from Saul David switched his behaviour pattern. He lied through his teeth to the priest at Nob. Ahimelech the priest “trembled when he saw David” (1 Sam 21:1). And with good reason. Here was the hero of the nation, alone and unarmed. This would have been highly unusual – David would have been known to travel with his close companions, and always fully armed because the nation was in a constant state of conflict with the Philistines. Something was wrong and Ahimelech questioned David.

David started off with a lie – he was alone because he was on a secret mission. He then compounded the lie by claiming his men were waiting for him at a pre-determined location. David then made matters even worse by asking for food and a weapon.

As for food – the only food the priest had was the “bread of the Presence” (Exodus 25:30). This was consecrated bread that had been on the altar for a week and would normally have been eaten by the priest and his family once replaced with fresh bread. As consecrated bread, there were rules pertaining to its consumption (verse 4). David piled on the lies – he and his (fictitious) men had abstained from sexual activity “as always” (verse 5). He claimed that his men always followed the rules (1 Sam 21:5) even when on ordinary missions, much more so on this secret mission.

David accepted the consecrated (and by now stale) bread as food, and the only weapon to hand was Goliath’s sword.

An interesting side note: David took Goliath’s sword for himself after his victory over Goliath (1 Sam 17:54). Here we find the sword in the tabernacle at Nob. Quite possibly David had donated the sword to be kept in the place of worship as a token of devotion and acknowledgment of God’s help in the fight with Goliath. David had been to Nob often before to worship (1 Sam 22:15) and was known to the priest and his family.

David downward spiral did not end with his dishonest encounter with the priest at Nob. He tried to find refuge with the enemy at Gath.

This incident illustrates David’s confused and desperate frame of mind. Not only was David known as one of the top warriors of Israel – and was probably feared and hated by the Philistines – he went to the birthplace of Goliath (1 Sam 17:23) to try and find safety. The attempt is illogical – in Gath David would have been even more feared and hated than in any other Philistine city.

And sure enough – David quickly realised that this had been a bad move and he was in danger of getting killed. He pretended to be insane (verse 13).

There was a belief in pre-Christian times and into the Middle Ages that those who were unstable of mind were touched by the gods and especially favoured by them. As such, people who exhibited signs of mental illness were considered protected and were not harmed or killed. It would appear from the reaction of Achish of Gath that this was true at that time as well. Instead of killing David and removing one of the best Israelite warriors, he has David expelled from the city.

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For pause and reflection: David's slide into despair that we can follow in chapters 20 and 21 can serve as a warning and an illustration of how we go into a backsliding mode. These thoughts came to me when I reviewed a sermon from Pastor Terry Rae at Rosebank Union Church in Johannesburg – recorded some 35 years ago.

- 1 *David goes to elaborate lengths to justify his absence at the feast. When we start drift away from God, we also can come up with all sorts of excuses why we are absent at the "feast" of communal worship. Especially in the current situation, when we are joining worship in a virtual world. Because we are not physically present and can be held accountable, we make our excuses to ourselves and simply avoid logging in to the service.*
- 2 *David pretends that everything is OK when confronted by Ahimelech at Nob. When we drift away and we encounter a fellow believer, we also pretend everything is fine. "How is your Bible study going?" may be the question. "Oh, everything is fine – I study regularly" is our answer – when the last time we cracked open a Bible may be a couple of months ago.*
- 3 *David eats stale bread from the altar. As our drift continues, we also "eat stale bread", spiritually speaking. Instead of refreshing our spiritual food by regular Scripture reading and prayer we neglect our spiritual diet.*
- 4 *David associates with the enemy. When our drifting has developed into dust-raising backsliding we may also associate with the "enemy". We may choose literature, companions or activities that are contrary to what God would want for us.*
- 5 *David changes his behaviour in Gath. When our backsliding progresses, we, too, may change our behaviour. We may still think we are "OK", but our changed behaviour may have serious consequences not only for us but for those who may look up to us as a role model.*

David's next stop on the run was the cave of Adullam. The original Hebrew writing could be rendered as either "cave" or "fortress"¹. Here he was joined by his family and others who were somehow in distress, in debt or otherwise running from something (1 Sam 22:2). It appears that David's family was at risk from persecution or killing by Saul, simply because of their association with David.

The fortress hill and town of Adullam could only support a relatively small number of people, and David's band must have strained the resources of the area, so he took his family to Moab, to the town of Mizpah, and obtained asylum for them under the protection of the king of Moab.

Side note: The kingdom of Moab was located on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. David's reliance on Moab for safety is not the first such instance for an Israelite – during a famine in Judah some 4 generations previous to David, Elimelech and his wife Naomi sought to survive by moving to Moab (Ruth 1:1, 2). Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth eventually became David's great-grandmother.

While David was escaping, Saul was desperate to find out where he had gone. One of Saul's herdsmen, Doeg, had seen David when he was at Nob, telling his fancy lies to the priest Ahimelech. Doeg reported

¹ Tregelles, Samuel (1857). *Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures, Translated, With Additions and Corrections from the Author's Thesaurus and Other Works*. London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, Limited. pp. 608d (DCVIII) – via archive.org.

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this to Saul. The priest and his entire family were summoned to appear before Saul, who accused Ahimelech of treason by virtue of assisting David.

Ahimelech's defense (1 Sam 22:14, 15) is eloquent and reflects the status David had in the kingdom before the rift with Saul. David is described as loyal to Saul, his son-in-law, captain of the bodyguard, highly respected in the royal household. This probably did not go down well with Saul, who was aware of all this – and was also convinced that David was after the kingdom itself.

The result of this was the massacre of the entire village of Nob at Saul's command. All the people - men, women, and children were killed, and all the livestock as well. A complete annihilation.

For pause and reflection: Following on from the reflection above: David's flight and the lies he told Ahimelech at Nob had serious consequences for Ahimelech and his family and friends. When we drift away from God and distance ourselves from our fellow believers our actions can also have serious unintended consequences for others. It has often been said that "we are the only Bible most people around us will ever read". When we start to live our lives in a way that does not reflect the intent God has for us, and our lives do not point others to Christ but away from Him, we may well be doing to our "neighbour" what David did to Ahimelech and his family – put them in grave (spiritual) danger.

Only one son, Abiathar, escaped. He tracked David down and reported the massacre.

At the end of chapter 22 David appears to have regained his self-respect. He took the responsibility for the massacre at Nob (verses 22, 23). The next stage of David's life was about to begin – we will cover that in chapter 4 of this series.

End of this set of notes

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