



A SWORD AND FIVE LOAVES

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 21:1-9

Tenth Message

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This morning we return to our studies on the life of King David from the book of First Samuel. When he was a mere boy, David had been anointed by the prophet Samuel and thrust into the court of King Saul. The suspicious Saul became mad with envy and rage at the very sight of the shepherd boy. In our last study, from chapter 20, Saul's resolve to kill David was revealed to Jonathan, the king's son and David's loyal friend. Following their prearranged code, Jonathan shot an arrow beyond David, who was hiding in a field. The command to David, voiced by Jonathan, was, "Go, for the Lord has sent you away."

In chapter 21, to which we come today, we find that David takes his first steps into the wilderness. He is embarked on a holy journey to meet God. There, in the wilderness, he will enter the school of spirituality, the very school of Christ. It is the school that all who want to follow the Lord must attend.

This text unearths the very heart of godly spirituality. David has fled in haste from the king's court in Gibeah. As a fugitive, lacking food and a weapon, his most pressing need is to make provision for his journey into the wilderness. Setting out, he has his first encounter about two miles southeast of Gibeah, in Nob. There, with great cunning and skill, he secures aid from Ahimelech, the high priest to King Saul, as we learn in these opening verses from chapter 21.

Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the **priest**; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, "Why are you alone and **no one** with you?" And David said to Ahimelech the **priest**, "The king has commissioned me with a matter, and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.' Now therefore, what do you have **on hand**? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found." And the **priest** answered David and said, "There is no **ordinary** bread **on hand**, but there is **holy** bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women." And David answered the **priest** and said to him, "Surely women have been **kept** from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were **holy**, though it was an **ordinary** journey; how much more then today will their vessels be **holy**?" So the **priest** gave him **holy** bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away.

Now one of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained (*kept*) before the LORD; and his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds.

And David said to Ahimelech, "Now is there not a

spear or a sword **on hand**? For I brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's matter was urgent." Then the **priest** said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah, behold, it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod; if you would take it for yourself, take it. For there is **no other** except it here." And David said, "There is **none like it**; give it to me." (1 Sam 21:1-9, NASB)

In narrative passages such as this it is sometimes difficult to grasp what the author is conveying. Biblical narrative can be viewed on many different levels, because the details are seldom presented in simple, black and white terms. In the literary structure, however, the repetition of various words, etc., the author gives clues as to the spiritual principles he is making. As far as structure is concerned, we have already seen that most of these narratives proceed from a beginning to a center line, where everything turns, and then the text returns to where it began.

We will begin by establishing the story line of this text. All Christians would do well to learn to become story tellers. Stories are the most effective means of declaring the gospel and changing the hearts of people. Actually, stories make up more than half of the Scriptures.

I. The Story Line¹ (21:1-9)

If you remember, the last scene in this narrative concerning the life of David was played out around a family feast at the king's court. On that evening everyone was present, everyone, that is, except David. The irritated Saul demanded, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to the feast (lit. bread)?" (20:27). The answer was that the king's table had become a dangerous place for David. But, of course, no one offered this as a reason. Instead, Saul was misled by Jonathan, who said that David had left to attend another holy feast in Bethlehem.

David was not so foolish as to return to his birthplace. Bethlehem ("house of bread") was no longer a safe house of bread for him, so he deliberately chose another "house of bread" — Nob — the leading sanctuary of the country. Arriving at Nob, he immediately consults the priest. But this man, Ahimelech, is not just any priest. He is the high priest to the king. What a daring move by David! The fugitive was looking for food and a weapon. And he was not seeking ordinary bread, but holy bread; and not just any weapon, but the king's trophy, the sword which was used in the victory over Goliath. Can you imagine the leader of the French Resistance during World War II requesting provisions for his men from Hitler's chief of staff? That, in a sense, is similar to what David is doing here, asking for provisions from Ahimelech, Saul's high priest.

So here we have an encounter between a fugitive, who is in fact the newly anointed king, and the priest of the reigning king. The word repetition identifies the key

players in the text as the priest and the king. (The word “king” is “melech,” thus the name Ahimelech actually means “my brother is king.”) What happens when the fugitive king of the new order meets the high priest of the existing king, the old order? This encounter builds on the interplay of the exchanges between these two.

To help us discover what is happening, we need to observe who speaks the most. David, we see, speaks four times. He has 5, 4, 3, and 2 lines (vv 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9). Ahimelech speaks three times, with 1, 3, and 4 lines. At the beginning of their conversation, David has a story to sell, thus he has to work hard to overcome Ahimelech’s anxiety. Then, as the fears of the priest are assuaged, David speaks less, and Ahimelech is free to speak more.

Notice that when Ahimelech comes to meet David, he is “trembling,” according to the text. He was suffering from the same kind of terror that the elders of Bethlehem felt when Samuel first came to anoint the new king (1 Sam 16:4). Certainly the high priest was not ignorant of the deterioration in the relationship between David and Saul. That is why he asks David, “Why are you alone and no one with you?” David replies that “the king” has commissioned him on a matter of utmost secrecy, and that he has directed his men to a certain place.

Then he presses Ahimelech with his request: “What do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found.” On the surface, his requirements sound rather innocuous. Have you ever done that to someone? They had something you wanted, but rather than asking for it, you pressed your case with an open-ended question. But David is eagerly seeking the holy bread. That is what he wants. The priest answers by saying there was no “ordinary” bread on hand, only “holy” bread. This is the job of a priest, to distinguish between that which is holy and that which is profane, and to protect the holy from the profane.

Ahimelech says while there was no ordinary bread on hand, there was consecrated bread, “if only the young men have kept themselves from women.” David’s men had to be consecrated, i.e., to not have had sexual relations with women (cf. Uriah, who refused to have sexual relations with a woman during holy war, 2 Sam 11:11). However, in his reply to David’s request for bread, Ahimelech is not really dealing with the issue at hand. According to Leviticus 24:5-9, David could not have this consecrated bread under any circumstances. Once the holy bread was replaced by new bread, it was to be eaten only by priests. But David responds, “The men were clean when they began the journey, though it was an *ordinary* journey, how much more now that they are on the king’s mission of a *holy* journey will they be *holy*?” David’s statement, that the holy journey that he was embarked upon had made him “exceptionally” clean, is the center line of the text. With these words, Ahimelech’s anxiety is overcome and he gives to David what is holy.

But a much bigger issue lurks behind these words. Which one of the kings, Saul or David, was clean? Verse 6 gives us the answer:

So the **priest** gave him **holy** bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away.

What was true of the shew bread was also true of the two kings. Saul was “removed from before the LORD, in order to put (a new king) in his place when he was taken away.” This symbolizes the fact that, because of his disobedience, Saul no longer had access to God through the priesthood.

An ominous note is struck in verse 7 with the introduction of a word concerning Doeg, the Edomite. He is described as the “chief (the word can mean “powerful, violent, or tyrannical”) of Saul’s shepherds.” Doeg, one of Saul’s hired guns, has heard everything that has passed between Ahimelech and David. For some strange reason, Doeg is detained (*kept*) before the presence of the Lord. The question arises, what is an Edomite doing in God’s sanctuary? As we will learn later, between Doeg’s betrayal and Saul’s rage, the entire priesthood will be destroyed.

David, having acquired holy food, now desires an appropriate weapon for his journey. So he inquires once again of Ahimelech: “Is there a sword or spear on hand, for... the king’s matter was urgent.” In reality, it was David’s own urgency in having to flee that led to his forgetting to take a weapon with him, not the urgency of the king’s matter. David wants *the* trophy, the spoils of war that rightfully belong to him.

The relieved Ahimelech, who now feels free to speak, responds with a ring of pride in his voice. He tells David that the trophy has been carefully kept, “wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod,” actually. He gives full freedom to David to avail himself of it, saying, “if you would take it for yourself, take it. For there is no other except it here.” Thus does the weapon, the spoils of holy war, return from God to the conqueror, David, through the agency of a priest.

I will make three reflections on this incident.

II. Reflections

(a) Is deception ever appropriate?

Obviously, the first question raised by this text is, Was it proper for David to deceive the priest? Notice what David said: “The king has commissioned me” (v. 2); “the king’s matter was urgent” (v. 8). Was he being truthful? Before we jump to conclusions, I think we need to look at the context of his statements. Remember that David’s anointing was a threat to the powers that be. God was overthrowing the old order and instituting the new. The war was on, lives were at stake, and David was being careful not to expose himself by placing all his cards on the table.

Secondly, a careful reading of the text demonstrates that what David said was not a direct lie. I would describe it as a statement cloaked in ambiguity. He had been sent out on a mission, commanded by the King of kings, in Jonathan’s words, to “go, for the Lord has sent you away” (20:22). His was a secret, urgent mission. Jonathan had admonished him, “Hurry, be quick, do not stay!” (20:38). David’s own reign as King over Israel would be the final end of this matter.

The principle here is this: When there is a war on, being truthful does not necessarily imply you have to disclose all your motives and strategies to those who would wish to use you, abuse you, or kill you.

There are striking similarities in this story with certain

incidents in the life of Jesus. From the beginning, our Lord's anointing was a threat to the powers that be. He was on a secret mission, so he kept his identity secret until his hour had come. He was unwilling to let anyone and everyone know the whole truth about him. That is why he silenced the demons who wanted to identify him early in his ministry (Mark 1:25). Oftentimes he was ambiguous with his enemies. Asked by Pilate, "Are you the King of the Jews?" he replied, "You say it." We learn in John 7 that he even worked a little deception with his brothers. During the Feast of Booths, although the Jews were seeking to kill him, his brothers told him to go and show himself in Judea. The reason behind their suggestion, they said, was that "no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If you do these things, show Yourself to the world." But Jesus replied, "You go. I do not go up" (some manuscripts add the word *yet*). The text goes on to say he did go up publicly but, as it were, in secret.

Many thousands of Jews were saved from the Holocaust by courageous people who did not place all their cards on the table. During my trip to Israel earlier this year, I visited a street called the Avenue of the Righteous, an avenue of trees planted in memory of people who helped save Jews during the Holocaust. We saw trees dedicated to Corrie Ten Boom and to Oscar Schindler, both of whom, through deception of the enemy, saved the lives of many innocent Jews. There is no doubt that Christians should not involve themselves in outright lying, but there may come times when they have to answer ambiguously and play their cards very carefully because of spiritual warfare.

The text raises a second question.

(b) What constitutes holiness? Is it ritual, or something deeper?

We have already seen that the job of a priest is to discern between what is holy and what is profane, and to protect that which is holy from becoming profane. While it is true that David violated the laws of holiness concerning the shew bread, which only members of the priesthood were to eat (Lev 24:5-9), yet Jesus himself commended David's actions as exemplary and spiritually perceptive. Our Lord used this very text to answer the Pharisees, who accused the disciples of violating the Sabbath by picking heads of grain. Jesus said: "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and became hungry, he and his companions: how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he gave it also to those who were with him?" (Mark 2:25-26).

On matters of ritual, David had an astonishing freedom that Saul never had. What gave David the insight to declare himself clean and be free to eat the holy bread of the priests? The answer, I believe, lies in the nature of the journey. By God's command, David had set out on a holy journey through the wilderness where he would meet with God. No ordinary food, but only holy food would suffice for that journey, which would so intensify his holiness that he would become a priest of a higher order than the priesthood of Aaron. David, in the words of one commentator, was invigorated by "sacred things, by nothing less than the Bread of the Presence. Just as God has looked benevolently on that food, so, the implication is, he will also

'make his face shine' on this refugee" (Fokklemann). David's holy journey made him a priest, with direct access to God.

We see parallels in the life of Jesus. Following our Lord's anointing at his baptism, he headed straight for the wilderness. Following forty days and nights of fasting, he refused earthly bread when tempted by the devil, who said to him: "Turn these stones into bread." "Feed yourself," was what the devil was suggesting. But Jesus refused, saying, "Man shall live by the word of God." He was waiting for God to feed him nothing less than heavenly manna. Mark says that later, Jesus was "ministered to by the angels." This word "ministered" is the same word used in Acts 6 of the deacons who served tables. The angels fed Jesus heavenly manna. Later still, during his ministry, Jesus would take his disciples into the wilderness, bypassing all the ritual of Jerusalem, and there give them "bread from heaven."

In Jerusalem I found it hard to visit many of the holy places because of various restrictions involving dress codes, times, etc. One day we were unsuccessful in getting to see the Temple Mount, and I decided to take time out to rest. I found a little archway in a schoolyard where a cooling breeze was filtering through. I sat there a while, and then decided to squeeze into the archway and lie down to rest. Just when I succeeded in doing so, I heard a voice saying: "It is forbidden!" It was a holy place, and lying down was forbidden. The same thing was true of another building across the street where I sat down to rest. I remembered the words of Jesus, "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Things were different in Galilee, however. There we sat on the hill where the feeding of the five thousand took place. Jesus had bypassed the intermediaries of Jerusalem and gone out into that simple place where he called down bread from heaven to feed his disciples. There is no place for ritual in the wilderness. There the Messianic King makes all things holy.

The New Testament injunction to us comes from Hebrews: "The Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year...make perfect those who draw near." Then speaking of the new order brought about in Christ, the author exhorts us, "Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with sincere heart in full assurance of faith having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:1, 19-22).

Charles Wesley put it this way in his hymn *Arise My Soul, Arise*:

Arise, my soul, arise.
Shake off thy guilty fears.
The bleeding Sacrifice
In my behalf appears.
Before the throne my Surety stands,
Before the throne my Surety stands;
My name is written on His hands.

My third and final reflection is this:

(c) What happens when two world orders collide?

At Nob, David, the fugitive king, came into contact with the high priest of Saul, the king according to the old order. God orchestrated the scene so that the priest did not merely give aid to the king, he gave him holy bread and a holy sword. This meeting became in a sense a special ordination ceremony by God. It was the occasion when the fugitive became a warrior and a priest.

Secondly, we see how the old priesthood was set up for future judgment by the presence of Doeg, the Edomite, who spied out the whole incident. (Thus the words of the prophet in 1 Samuel 2:31-33 would be fulfilled concerning the house of Eli.) This new kingdom is not only consecrated by the old order, it unravels it. Following this event, David wrote these words in Psalm 52:8-9:

But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of
God;
I trust in the loyal-love of God forever and ever.
I will give You thanks forever, because You have done
it,
And I will wait on Your name, for it is good,
In the presence of Your godly ones. (Ps 52:8-9).

So it was with Christ. God so orchestrated his life and ministry, he received the unsolicited, spontaneous testimony of others, even his enemies, as to who he was. His enemy, Pilate, put a sign above his head on the cross in full public view. He wrote these words in three languages: *King of the Jews*. A little later that day, the Roman centurion uttered his unsolicited testimony: "Truly, this was the Son of God."

Ahimelech's ordination of David, therefore, sealed the downfall of his own entire order and marked the end of the priesthood. As these two orders, the old and the new, collide, we see both the judgment and the grace of God at work. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the fate of both Israel and Rome were sealed. Neither nation would stand, but the church of Christ would stand forever.

Are you on a holy journey in the wilderness? Then seek what is holy, and allow God to ordain you.

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1. I have depended much on the great insights of J.P. Fokkemann's classic work, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Volume 2, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986).