



# REAL DRAMA IN GATH

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 21:10-22:1  
Eleventh Message  
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A few years ago, I took a trip to Colorado with about twelve men from this church. During the long drive, I sat in the passenger seat of a pickup driven by a new friend. As we crossed the Nevada desert, I asked this man to share his story with me. Looking out at the desert that surrounded us, he began by saying that he felt he was living in a spiritual desert. He had come from a Christian home, but he had drifted from the faith, he said. He had married an unbeliever, and they became involved in a lifestyle of partying and drinking. They had two children, but that didn't inhibit their lifestyle. Then his brother became a Christian, and he invited him to church one day. Shortly afterwards, he came to Christ. He said he felt his sins were forgiven, his soul cleansed, and he found he had new appetites and affections.

His new life created dissonance in his home, however. His wife wanted to continue to party and drink (by now she was an alcoholic), but he refused to go along with her. She would go out by herself and stay out until all hours of the morning. At the time of the trip to Colorado they were separated, and she already had a boyfriend. I asked him what he was going to do. "As a Christian, where do you turn when your whole world blows up and you are attacked by those closest to you?" I asked him. He told me that the first piece of advice he got came from Christians. They told him to get the best attorney possible and go after his wife in court. I asked him if he intended to follow their advice. "If I do, I might win the battle," he said, "but would I win the war? What effect would that have on her soul?" He said that one of the reasons he was going on the trip to Colorado was to help him discover what to do with his life. A few years later as our men's group was studying this passage, he testified that it was this text from First Samuel, which we will look at today, that told him exactly what to do.

This morning, we pick up the story of David once more, from the narrative account in 1 Samuel. Having received practical help from the priest at the sanctuary of Nob, David now flees due west. Wanting to get as far away from Saul as possible, he arrives in Philistine territory, of all places. Why does he choose to go there? It is because both he and the Philistines are enemies of Saul. Perhaps David is thinking that if he makes an alliance with Achish, the king of Gath, by selling his military services, he will find safety.

The question raised by this text is this: What happens when we flee to the world and make alliances with it to do for us what God has promised to do in the wilderness? Let us see what happens as we accompany David on his flight to Gath. Our text is 1 Samuel 21:10-22:1.

Then David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish

said to him, "Is **this not** David the **king of the land**? Did they **not** sing of **this one** as they danced, saying,

'Saul has slain his thousands,  
And David his ten thousands?'"

And David took these **words to heart**, and greatly **feared** Achish king of Gath. So he **disguised his sanity before them**, and acted insanelly in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man behaving as a **madman**. Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack **madmen**, that you have brought this one to act the **madman** in my presence? Shall **this one** come into my house?"

So David departed from there and **escaped** to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him. (NASB)

## The Story Line<sup>1</sup>

At the scene opens, David is making a beeline directly west from Nob. He arrives in Philistine territory, in the land of Achish, king of Gath.<sup>2</sup> Notice that the action is framed by geographical details. The scene begins with David *fleeing* to Gath; and ends with him *escaping* to Adullam. In these six verses we see what happens when a believer wanders into foreign soil (represented by Gath) to seek aid, and the consequences that result until he undertakes the journey home (represented by Adullam).

So David arrives in Goliath's home turf, carrying the sword of the slain champion. It is obvious that he wants to come to a political accommodation. But before negotiations can begin, the politically savvy servants of Achish give David's identity away. (In this book, the servants always appear to be blessed with more insight than the kings.) Here is what they chant:

"Is this not David the king of the land?  
Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying,  
'Saul has slain his thousands,  
And David his ten thousands?'"

The song of the women of Israel, repeated word for word, following David's astonishing victory over Goliath, has made it all the way to foreign soil. The refrain resonates with implications as to the destiny of David. It was these very words that caused Saul to ponder who David really was, when he reflected, "What more can he have but the kingdom?" (18:8). But the Philistine servants see David in even larger terms. They refer to him as "King of the land." J.P. Fokklemann makes the point that "the text gives us the surprise that we meet no less than three kings within the scope of a mere four lines...There are two kings

with land, Saul and Achish, and the third, David, shuttles back and forth between them. It is precisely this king without land who is now called 'the king of the land.' Land is an open-ended designation with no boundaries, and the servants leave it to their King to draw the right conclusion and take the appropriate action." The servants prove to be a first-class intelligence source. And they have the right view of David, too. Twenty years later, this king will be more powerful than all the Philistine city princes put together. Isn't it ironic that the messianic king's destiny is better understood in gentile lands than in Israel?

These servants' words penetrate deep into David's soul and he becomes terrified. It was fear that drove him to foreign soil, and now fear turns to terror<sup>3</sup> when he finds that he is trapped. The phrase "in their hands" (v 13) may indicate that David was actually arrested by Achish's secret service. He has no avenue for escape. How ironic, when we remember that before his departure into the wilderness, he was given all kinds of support — supernatural protection by the prophets (19:19-24), spiritual encouragement and loyal-love from Jonathan (20:42), and practical help from the high priest at Nob (21:6, 9). A fugitive in foreign soil now, he finds no help or support.

So David throws off all his inhibitions. Feigning the role of a madman before Achish, the text says, "He changed his sanity (discernment, understanding, suitable behavior) in their eyes." This scene is reminiscent of Saul, whose behavior was changed as he approached the prophet Samuel, and he prophesied. The difference is that "David, unlike Saul, always operates with great intentionality" (Walter Brueggemann). As I was studying this text, David Roper sent me a note that said: "Have you noticed Achish's odd word for madman (*shaga'* - *be mad, rage, or howl*)? (21:16). I understand the cognate Akkadian word suggests a *violent, dangerous* man. It suggests that David played the role to the hilt, acting in such a way that he scared the living daylights out of Achish and his courtiers!" David puts on an Academy Award-winning performance. He is playing the role of his life, acting for his very life. Truly, this scene is *Real Drama in Gath!*

Notice the twin actions of David. He "scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard." These two actions are symbolic of what happens to our souls when we seek alliances with the world. To scribble on the gate "is a picture of sorrow, impotence and longing. Behind the gate lies freedom, and he himself is locked up. He wants to leave this palace which has become a prison, but he does not know how to and, just like a real madman, falls back on the secret language of insanity in order to express his despair and his longing to escape. At the same time, the picture contains the inexorable hardness of the great gate and the walls next to it, against which the weak efforts of a poor madman can avail nothing. The next line is a clearer sign of madness, for the saliva dribbling into his beard implies an elementary loss of control...The madman has left the plane of communication which makes us all human...this idiot can no longer be spoken to...His world is one of total isolation and his universe is completely inaccessible" (Fokklemann). David cannot get out of his world and no one can enter his.

This text is a dire warning of what can happen to us when we make an unholy alliance with the world to fight our battles for us. We think we will gain freedom, but all

we succeed in doing is compromising our real identity. Thus we create a prison for ourselves where we can no longer communicate who we really are. Shut out of the real world, we feel frustrated, and we may end up going insane.

David's acting job is very successful. While the servants of Achish assess David by what they *hear*, Achish judges by what he *sees* (just as in chapter 17, when Saul and his men assessed Goliath by what they *saw*, David assessed Goliath by what he *heard*). Achish is indignant. He thinks his courtiers are stupid, when in fact it is he who is stupid. He cries, "Do I lack madmen that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence. Shall this one come into my house?" The scene ends with David being driven out (*garash*, literally: "thrown out") by Achish (Psalm 34:1).

Narrowly escaping death, David flees to seek refuge in Judea. He goes to the cave of Adullam, about twelve miles from his home town of Bethlehem. To get there, he would have had to walk right past the valley where he killed Goliath. Reflecting on his adventure into foreign soil, there in the cave of Adullam he writes Psalm 34, one of the classic descriptions of faith under pressure.

## Reflections

I will make four reflections on this account of David's compromising with the world in his efforts to seek protection for himself.

### (a) Where do we turn in our wilderness?

The greatest temptation we face in our wilderness is this: Instead of waiting on God, we immediately draw on our worldly support systems and make alliances with them to do for us what only God can do. In the New Testament, Paul describes this as "being unequally yoked" with unbelievers. It is fear that drives us to seek these alliances. Fear is a powerful force that can overcome even the strongest in the faith. When David was relying on God, he confronted Goliath without fear, yet in this account so terrified is he at the thought of having to face Saul that he seeks the aid of a Philistine garrison.

We can identify our fears by asking ourselves in what arenas have we made worldly alliances to do battle for us. When do we have most difficulty waiting on God? For some, it is the fear of being single. They cannot wait for the Lord to bring them their mates, so they marry unbelievers. Others do not trust God with their finances, so they have difficulty in giving to the Lord until they achieve financial security.

### (b) What happens when we make alliances with the world?

If we choose to make an alliance with the world, God will let us have our way and we will become trapped. What we may regard as answered prayer is really his wrath, and we find that instead of delivering us like we dreamed, our alliances create prisons where we can't communicate. The walls are hard; we feel impotent to do anything. So we become angry and withdraw within ourselves. We imagine that no one understands us, no one really knows us. Finally, we go mad.

Not only does this inflict personal damage on us, we also lose our ministry to the world. "Though ingenious falsehoods may seem to promote present security, yet they

insure future disgrace" (A.W. Pink). Not only was David humiliated, but the Lord was dishonored. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul applies this text with respect to the practice of lawsuits among believers. The Corinthian Christians were hauling one another into court, making alliances with unbelieving attorneys and suing one another before unbelieving judges. Reminding believers of their identity, Paul says, "Don't you know that the saints will judge the world ...do you not know that we shall judge angels...I say this to your shame...Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged?" (1 Cor 6:2-7). In reality, the Corinthians were supposed to be attorneys for Christ, men and women who would gladly give up worldly possessions and suffer wrong so that their adversaries would come to know of the Lord. When Paul himself was in court, he confronted his judges with the gospel of Christ, regardless of cost to himself. We could take a lesson here with regard to politics. When the Church makes political alliances to further its cause, it brings shame to itself and to the Lord.

### (c) Does God give up on us?

Though David is on foreign soil, God reminds him of his identity by using his enemies, the servants of Achish. David was not supposed to be in Gath on these terms. After all, he was the "King of the Land." This song spreads across the winds, making the gentile nations ready for the Messianic King. "Though we are faithless, He remains faithful, because He cannot deny Himself." And second, God presses in on the situation to force the issue. Psalm 34 indicates that when David was acting like a madman, he actually was praying his heart out. Third, God delivers David by grace. He was thrown out of town by Achish the king. And fourth, God brings David home.

This is what God does with all his wayward sons and daughters: He brings them home. I had a close friend who made an unholy alliance with the world some years ago. For ten years, he disguised his identity and lived a life of deceit, carrying on an adulterous affair. When he was found out, he admitted his wrongdoing. But then his partner in adultery went overseas, and instead of staying home in Adullam, he followed her to Gath, chasing after his dream. But God set in motion a plan to bring him back. My friend's boss was a Christian man, and he reminded him of who he was in Christ. Before long, he stopped acting like a madman. He repented and came home. God gave his wife the grace to forgive him, and their marriage was restored. They now have a ministry of counseling other couples who have troubled marriages. God is faithful to recall from the world those whom he loves.

### (d) Deeper reflections of faith in the cave of Adullam

When at last David was back on his own turf, resting safely in the cave of Adullam, reflecting on the events in Gath, he wrote Psalm 34. The psalm is inscribed, "*when he feigned madness before Abimelech.*" During our trip to Israel this summer, we found the cave of Adullam on the side of a forested hill. Looking west from the top of the hill to the valley of Elah, we surveyed the place where David slew Goliath. Twelve miles to the northwest we could see Bethlehem. We could even see part of the skyline of Jerusalem.

There in the cave of Adullam, God restored David to his spiritual roots. In Adullam David wrote Psalm 34, one of the classic descriptions of true spirituality. The psalm,

which is written in the form of an acrostic, is heavily quoted and alluded to in the New Testament (1 Peter 2,3). It is even prophetic of Jesus Christ. If we did not have the narrative account that we have just looked at in 1 Samuel 21, however, we would not know that the psalm was birthed in the context of fear and deceit. When we juxtapose the psalm with the narrative, we have an accurate description of how David's soul resonated between earthly fears and heavenly trust. Oftentimes our deepest and best reflections come after we have failed miserably. When we go into the wilderness, all we need to do is be willing to learn. There in the wilderness, confronted at last with his own failure, David came to grips with who God really is and what faith was all about.

The psalm opens with a word of general praise:

I will bless the LORD at all times;  
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.  
My soul shall make its boast in the LORD;  
The humble shall hear it and rejoice.  
O magnify the LORD with me,  
And let us exalt His name together. (1-3)

Then David refers to the specific events of his deliverance.

I sought the LORD, and He answered me,  
And delivered me from all my fears.  
They looked to Him and were **radiant**,  
And their faces shall never be **ashamed**.  
**This poor man** cried and the LORD heard him,  
And saved him out of all his troubles.  
The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him,  
And rescues them. (4-7)

God heard David's cry and delivered him from all his fears. It was not his acting ability that saved him, but rather an angel sent by the grace of God. Although David had brought shame to his Maker, God saved him. That was why this restored sinner could look into God's eyes with no sense of shame, because God's love and forgiveness made him radiate his Redeemer's love.

Now a forgiven sinner, David is restored as a teacher with a passion for the truth.

O **taste** (same word as "sanity" 21:13) and see that the LORD is good;  
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!  
O fear the LORD, you His saints;  
For to those who fear Him, there is **no want**.  
The young lions do lack and suffer hunger;  
But they who seek the LORD shall **not be in want of any good thing**. (8-10)

When you are in the wilderness, you don't need anybody or anything but God. The lesson is obvious: Don't fear men; fear God.

Come, you children, listen to me:  
I will teach you the **fear of the LORD**.  
Who is the man who desires life,  
And loves length of days that he may see good?  
Keep your tongue from evil,  
And your **lips** from speaking **deceit**.  
Depart from evil, and do good;  
Seek peace and pursue it. (11-14)

When David feared man, he disguised his identity and made an unholy alliance. In the wilderness, we must remain dependent and not allow fear of danger to compromise our ethics. We should learn to fear God, not men.

The **eyes** of the LORD are toward the righteous,  
And His **ears** are open to their cry.  
The face of the LORD is against evil doers,  
To cut off the memory of them from the earth.  
The righteous cry and the LORD hears,  
And delivers them out of all their troubles.  
The LORD is **near** to the brokenhearted,  
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.  
**Many are the afflictions of the righteous;**  
But the LORD delivers him out of them all.  
**He keeps all his bones;**  
**Not one of them is broken.**  
Evil shall slay the wicked;  
And those who hate the righteous will be condemned.  
The LORD **redeems** the soul of His servants;  
And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned. (15-22)

This was not the last affliction that David would face. There would be many more, with death as the final affliction, but even in death, God would redeem him. David's insight became prophetic of Jesus. God kept all his bones;

not one of them was broken.

With the words in verse 21, "Evil shall slay the wicked; And those who hate the righteous will be condemned," David reaches the end of the alphabet. But he has one more thought that he wants to include, so he adds another letter. There is one word he wants to leave us with, the word "redeem":

The LORD **redeems** the soul of His servants;  
And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned."

Our God is a redemptive God who redeems the souls of his servants.

This psalm of David soars to the very heights of spirituality. Every Christian should reflect on it, memorize it, and sing it.

To those of you who are in Gath today I say, come home, and God will make your faces radiant. Amen.

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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), 362-371.

2. For an outstanding history and archaeology of the Philistines see Trude and Moshe Dothan, *People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

3. Note that the word "fear" becomes a key word in Psalm 34. It is used four times (7, 9, 9, 11) with new spiritual insight. Terrors is used once v 4, "The Lord...delivered me from all my fears."