

I Samuel

Lesson 35 - Chapter 21

The last time we were together we began a section of the Bible that deals with David's escape from the now paranoid and homicidal King Saul. This is a major turning point in redemption history as up to now David had been part of King Saul's government administration, even his inner court. But from this point forward the two become mortal enemies and it is from this platform that David will complete his unlikely rise to the throne of Israel as God's anointed earthly king.

Let's re-read all of 1st Samuel chapter 21 to get our bearings.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 21 all

David has fled to Nob where there was some type of sanctuary to YHWH in operation; his stay was probably no more than a day. Nob was located not far from Gibeah, King Sha'ul's hometown and the main location he seemed to operate from. There is much conjecture as to Nob's precise location, but more and more Biblical archaeologists and Bible scholars are now comfortable that Nob was probably located on what is referred to in modern times as Mt. Scopus that overlooks Jerusalem. For those who have been to Israel, you know that it is a brief walk (a few hundred yards) from Mt. Scopus to the walls of the Temple Mount.

There is an assumption that David had comrades accompanying him because he told the High Priest of Nob that they were sent on ahead, which is why he appeared to the High Priest to be traveling alone. In fact in the New Testament Gospel accounts that mention this incident there seems to have been a Jewish tradition that indeed there were some men with David. However there is nothing here that would indicate that David was truthful with the High Priest in that regard. In reality David's entire encounter with Ahimelech, the High Priest of Nob, was filled with deception and deceit and soon it would result in the unintended consequence of the extermination of every person associated with the Nob sanctuary. It seems highly doubtful to me that as skillfully as David and Jonathan had worked to uncover whether there was a royal plot to kill David, and then a plan was devised in case it was necessary for David to stealthily slip away from Saul, that in a matter of hours he would now suddenly have a contingent of men attached to him as he hastily retreated the short distance from Gibeah to Nob.

Verses 2, 3 and 4 seem to indicate that David's only purpose to escape first to Nob was so he could pick up some food and a weapon for a longer journey. Since David was a member of King Saul's court and privy to how the king operated and who he tended to confide in, he undoubtedly knew that Ahimelech and the priests at Nob had no idea that Saul intended to kill David, or that David was in the process of running away. Thus Ahimelech was merely a naïve dupe who David used to provision himself.

Let's pause a moment to review the political and religious climate of Israel at this time

because our understanding of David's actions and the responses of those he would come into contact with are dependent on our knowledge of the circumstances.

First: Israel was not a sovereign nation just yet. King Saul tried to build the group of 12 tribes into a unified country, but had not succeeded. There were essentially two primary tribal coalitions of Israelites who formed the Hebrew people in this era, and those two coalitions were in opposition to one another. One coalition consisted of those tribes located in the central and northern area of Canaan, led at this time by the tribe of Benjamin. King Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin. The other coalition consisted of those tribes located in the southern part of Canaan, led by Judah. David was of the tribe of Judah.

Second: the Philistines were very active and constantly a thorn in Saul's side; but there were other enemies present as well. Moab was an enemy and had even captured some amount of territory in the area that at one time was controlled by Reuben and Gad (on the east side of the Jordan River).

Third: the all-important Levitical Priesthood was fractured. There were at least two High Priests in existence, and therefore at least two sets of common priests (each set loyal to the sanctuary overseen by their High Priest). The High Priest and his common priests at Nob were probably seen as the most legitimate and authoritative at this time. Ahimelech was a descendant of Eli, the High Priest that raised Samuel when he was a child. So Samuel would have legitimized Ahimelech since Ahimelech was descended from his mentor Eli.

Fourth: the first sanctuary location of the Levitical Priesthood (when Joshua first led Israel across the Jordan) was at Shiloh. But the Wilderness Tabernacle that existed there for decades had become a ramshackle and was abandoned. The site was destroyed, and the priesthood left the area. Although we're not explicitly told so, since here in 1st Samuel 21 we find the great grandson of Eli (who presided at Shiloh) operating as High Priest at Nob, we can reasonably assume that those priests of Shiloh had not died out but rather had migrated to Nob to resume operation.

Fifth and perhaps most important: the Lord God had abandoned King Saul. King Saul was devoid of Yehoveh's presence or even His influence (at least an influence in the positive sense). This led to Saul's current state of irrationality, bitterness, paranoia, and hatred toward David. Further Saul was (from a spiritual perspective) no longer the legitimate king over God's people and all that was left was for earthly political reality to catch up to this fact. Saul was now a full-fledged enemy of Yehoveh; he had no intention of relinquishing the throne given to him by the Lord, nor did he intend to willingly turn it over to the man the Lord had chosen as the successor: David. The King of Israel would fight to the death to defend what he saw as his despite knowing deep down he had no chance to succeed.

With this in mind, let's continue. David approaches Ahimelech at Nob and asks for food and a weapon. The only food available was the Shewbread that had just been retired from its place in the sanctuary. The Torah Law was that each Sabbath 12 loaves of this specially made bread were to be placed "before the Lord" on the Table of Shewbread that was located in the front chamber of the sanctuary tent. The 12 loaves that had been on display there for the past week

were to be removed and eaten by the Priests and Levites at the sanctuary location (not actually inside the tent, but nearby). Ahimelech offered to give 5 of the 12 loaves of this just-retired Shewbread to David and his phantom men. By all accounts this was a serious violation of the Law that stated that ONLY the priests could eat of this consecrated bread. I don't know if this fact especially bothered David or the priests at Nob, but it certainly made an impact on future generations. In fact the incident became so infamous that over 1000 years later it was still remembered by Jewish society. Turn your Bibles to Mark 2 and we're going to read starting at verse 23.

READ MARK 2:23 – 27

Here we find no less that Messiah Yeshua recalling this matter of David taking the holy portion of bread from the sanctuary and eating it. That Jesus used it in the context of a Sabbath incident that he was currently embroiled in makes me think that (at least in Jewish tradition) the event we're reading about concerning David in 1st Samuel actually took place on the Sabbath, on the very day the Shewbread was being replaced with 12 fresh loaves (which also means that David was fleeing on the Sabbath, which I think is probable).

It is not coincidental that we have such similarity and interconnectedness with David, the early shadow of the Messiah (and presumably some of David's followers), fleeing from the anti-king (Sha'ul) on the Sabbath; Jesus 1000 years later recalling this incident and correlating it to a Sabbath controversy with the Pharisees; and the prophecy of Matthew 24 concerning the even later End Times appearance of the anti-king/anti-Christ whereby God-followers are told to escape from Judah to the hills AND pray that this event not occur in winter or ON THE SABBATH.

READ MATTHEW 24:15 -21

What is the problem of escaping to the hills on the Sabbath? It is a violation of God's command to do no work and to not start a journey on the Sabbath. So even running to escape the anti-Christ will have a measure of sin involved if done on the Sabbath.

I have taught you for years that in order to understand the New Testament beyond a surface level, or even to understand it as it was always intended, we first need the foundation of the Old Testament firmly affixed in our minds. And that the Old Testament and the New Testament are simply one unified Bible that Christianity has artificially (and with tragic consequences) separated into two sections; one section that has been declared as dead and gone and thus replaced by another newer section. In fact both Testaments are needed and fully intertwined, and here is a good place to demonstrate that fact.

Turn your Bibles just a few pages back to the book of Matthew chapter 12. In this chapter this same account is also written down; in fact this incident with Christ plucking grain on the Sabbath is in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), each with slightly different emphasis.

READ MATTHEW 12:1 – 6

I won't dwell here long, but I'd like to hopefully increase your understanding of what is happening in this story of Christ and his disciples plucking grain on Sabbath by incorporating the actual context of the story as told in 1st Samuel. The primary question before us is this: why is the story of David taking the Shewbread from Nob pertinent and representative of Yeshua and His disciples plucking and eating grain from a field (nowhere near the Temple) on the Sabbath? And I'd like to offer that at least part of that answer is contained in a rather cryptic statement of Yeshua found in verse 5.

CJB Matthew 12:5 "Or haven't you read in the Torah that on Shabbat the cohanim profane Shabbat and yet are blameless?"

Strange. Here we have Yeshua say that (according to the Torah) on Shabbat the priests "profane the Sabbath" and even more that somehow, at some level, they are considered blameless (presumably by God). And this is also in some way parallel to what happened at Nob when Ahimelech gave David the Shewbread.

The modern Christian explanation of this has been the Yeshua was chastising the Pharisees and others about their Traditions that had resulted in the Priesthood profaning the Sabbath. But that is not what is said; and further Yeshua says that the instruction for the Priests TO profane the Sabbath comes from the Torah.

No, this is not about Tradition. The issue is this: the most fundamental principle of Sabbath is that it is to be a day of rest for all. It is to both commemorate and to mimic the conclusion of Creation, and the celebration of which is also a sign that those who observe the Sabbath are God's people. No "normal" work is to be done. No fire is to be kindled. No food gathered or prepared. And yet the priests are to go to "work" as normal at the Temple, light the altar fire, slaughter animals, and ritually offer them to the Lord. Then the Levites are to come along and clean up the mess, etc. The Shewbread is replaced and the priests eat the prior week's fare. All this and more occurs at the Temple on the Sabbath, and it ordered by the Lord in the Torah Law.

Essentially we have a conflict (and Christ acknowledges as much). God on the one hand orders that no one is to do normal work or it is sin and thus profanes the Sabbath, but on the other hand the Levitical Priesthood is also ordered by God to DO their normal work so that it HONORS the Sabbath. From another perspective the Priests are in a sense violating Torah (committing a sin) in order that the laypeople of Israel would benefit by having their sins atoned for and their relationship with YHWH affirmed (the sacrifices on Sabbath are national, communal sacrifices for the Israelites as a people group).

Let me say it another way: the Priests were demonstrating mercy by continuing their normal work on the Sabbath (and thus sinning) because God demanded sacrifices on the Sabbath Day on behalf of the people so that they would be at peace with God. This is why Christ could say that although the Priests profaned the Sabbath, they are (at some level) held blameless because they were ordered to do so. Mercy trumped the strictest adherence to the letter of the Law when two laws collided.

Thus the analogy between what Christ was doing by allowing His hungry disciples to pluck grain (work) on the Sabbath and what the High Priest at Nob did by giving David the sanctified Shewbread is appropriate. David was a man in need of food. He was fleeing a murderer. He was hungry (and presumably these phantom men were also hungry). The High Priest Ahimelech showed David mercy and profaned the Sabbath by giving David the Shewbread that was reserved only for the priests. And yet, Christ would say that what Ahimelech did was the better thing to do.

This is essentially a Kal V'homer argument (light versus heavy) that Yeshua was offering the Pharisees who confronted Him. It is the argument that some laws of God carry more weight than other laws, and it was inevitable that regularly God's laws would collide and a worshipper would have to choose which one to obey and which one to violate when such a situation arose. For instance the Torah makes it clear that laws concerning the preservation of innocent life carry more weight than laws of ritual observance. Thus if on the Sabbath one sees an animal fall into a hole, or a human in distress, it is incumbent upon the one who discovers the problem to take whatever measures are needed to save them no matter how much work or travel is involved.

We saw this same concept in the story of the Good Samaritan when a priest wouldn't help a man in dire need that the priest feared the man might be dead (or die in his care) and thus the priest would become defiled (and this is true according to Torah Law); but a detested Samaritan did help the man without thought of personal defilement because the life and well-being of the injured man was more important than the possibility of his becoming contaminated with the very serious ritual impurity of death.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day, although in all their self-righteousness they punctiliously sought to follow the letter of the Torah Law, also violated the SPIRIT of the Law when they ignored human need if they thought it might somehow cause them to sin or become unclean. They ignored the greatest commandment (the foundational commandment upon which all other commands rest) to love the Lord thy God with all thy mind, heart and strength, and to love thy neighbor (our fellow man) as thy self.

You see, it is because of our fallen nature and of the fallen nature of the world in which we exist that all mankind is caught on the horns of a dilemma. It was never supposed to be like this. Nothing operates as it should because sin has become pervasive. God did not create a faulty creation; rather mankind (beginning with Adam) perverted it. Almost daily we will find ourselves situations that we are nearly forced to sin. How often we'll compliment someone with a compliment that isn't necessarily true but it is the graceful and merciful thing to do. Doctors, policemen, emergency workers and others are needed to work on the Sabbath for the good of us all. We constantly have to choose between obeying one law of God over another even though we may not consciously think about it.

In the prior lesson I offered the example of Corrie Ten-Boom who hid Jews from Nazis in WWII. When she was asked about the whereabouts of Jews that she was hiding, she blatantly lied. She defied her government by hiding these Jewish fugitives. She broke the civil law in doing what she did. Yet, she also saved innocent life. If we sin in the name of sinning for a

good reason or a better thing, is it no longer sin in God's eyes? The answer to that is that **it indeed is still sin**. But our showing God's mercy to another by knowingly being willing to take a sin upon our shoulders is the better thing to do and in fact it is expected of us by the Father and Christ spoke of it in this story of plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. This impossible situation is why we need Messiah. This is also why no man can claim to be sinless even though he might also claim to follow the letter of the Torah Law to perfection. Even the Priests (according to Yeshua) had to in one sense break the Law against working on Sabbath in order to obey the Law to sacrifice on behalf of the people. The corrupted state of the physical world that is our realm is such that obeying the Spirit of the Law will necessarily at times conflict with obedience to the letter of the Law.

The Good News is that Messiah has come, and the sins that we did, do, and will commit (even in love and mercy) are paid for by Him. But another part of the Good News is that this impossible conundrum will not always be so. When Messiah returns and His Kingdom is fully established this awful choice will no longer confront us. The Law will still operate, the Temple will again stand, but the conflict between laws won't occur because the inherent corruption of the world and everything and everyone in it will have been removed from Satan's authority and placed under Messiah's. And then after the Millennium, when the current Heavens and Earth pass away and new ones are brought about, sin itself won't even exist any longer. All will be as God intended from the beginning.

Back to 1st Samuel 21.

In verse 8, as David was conversing with Ahimelech, nearby skulked a fellow named Doeg. Doeg was apparently King Sha'ul's chief henchman. He was a foreigner, an Edomite, not a Hebrew. Fittingly the ungodly King of Israel had chosen this uncircumcised pagan to be his eyes and ears and to be in charge of his bodyguards and his flocks. Now that David had food, he needed a weapon so he asks the priest if perhaps there was one there at the encampment. What an odd thing; why would David think that there would be a weapon at the sanctuary of Nob? Interestingly it turned out that the sword of Goliath was being stored in the sanctuary and so Ahimelech knowing that it was David who took the sword from Goliath in the first place, figured who better to turn it over to than David?

This lends further credence to Nob being located on what is now called Mt. Scopus. Listen to what we read about the whereabouts of Goliath's sword in an earlier chapter of 1st Samuel.

CJB 1 Samuel 17:54 David took the head of the P'lishti and brought it to Yerushalayim, but he put the armor of the P'lishti in his tent.

Notice that David took the head of Goliath to Jerusalem however it also says that he put the Armor of Goliath in "his" tent. This translation has always been dubious and many scholars dispute it. The "his" or "his own" in reference to the tent is not really present in the Scripture; that it was David's tent is assumed by translators. Probably better would be that David took the head of Goliath to Jerusalem and put Goliath's armor in THE tent. But of course what tent would that be referring to? It's obvious; the tent sanctuary at Nob, just a few hundred yards from the city gates of Jerusalem. David thought to ask for a weapon at a very unlikely place to

find one (the sanctuary to YHWH), because he himself had brought that sword there only a few years earlier and wondered if it might still be present. The reason for his fleeing first to Nob (of all unlikely places) is becoming clearer.

In asking for his prize sword to be returned to him, David continues in his deceit and says that the reason he needs it is because he had to leave in a hurry as the king's mission was so urgent.

In verse 10 Ahimelech tells David that the sword is wrapped in "a cloth" and hidden behind the ritual vest. What those words actually say is that Goliath's sword was wrapped in a **simlah**, and hidden behind an **ephod**. A **simlah** was the everyday dress worn by a commoner, a lay person. It was the simple humble garment of a typical poor Hebrew person; a shepherd, a craftsman, a field worker. Overlaying the **simlah** was an **ephod**, which can be the undergarment of a priest. At first the term ephod referred to a special piece of the High Priest's uniform; later it came to mean an undergarment or even a middle garment that all priests wore. It's hard to know here exactly which is being referred to.

Bread and sword in hand, David continues his flight and goes to the city of Gath. The irony is thick; David, the slayer of Goliath, carries Goliath's unique sword with him to Goliath's hometown, in hopes of being protected by (of all people) the Philistines! One can only wonder why David would choose such a risky tactic. About 23 miles southwest of Nob, the King of Gath (**Achish**) is shocked to see David standing before him. **Achish** is no fool and instantly recognizes David (the sword of Goliath couldn't have helped David's disguise very much).

He says, "Isn't this David, the king of the land"? **Achish** knew full well that David wasn't the King of Israel; his soldiers had been fighting against King Saul for years. Rather this was a kind of mocking as he looked up this great warrior of whom the women sang songs, but now disheveled and well out of his comfort zone. One can only imagine what was going through the King of Gath's mind. Whatever would possess David to show up here? He had to be wary, suspicious, and a bit worried.

No doubt David was at first hoping to be taken in as a defector from Saul's government. Perhaps **Achish** would see him as a valuable tool to use against Saul. After all, the ancient parable that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" would not have been lost on a man of **Achish's** stature. But it was not to be. The King of Gath's demeanor and tone told David he had miscalculated in coming here so David (always quick on his feet) began to act like a madman. He started scratching his nails on the door and drooling down his beard.

Why didn't the king simply have David killed at this point? What difference did it make that David was insane? Did the king spare him out of mercy for his mental state? Hardly. In those times madness was viewed through the lens of superstition. Just as it was that King Saul's own inner court saw Saul's fits of rage and irrationality as a kind of madness, and concluded that since madness is caused by evil spirits they needed the mysterious antidote of music to counteract it, so for **Achish** to have a madman in his presence or to kill him could cause evil spirits to bedevil him or his city.

So the King of Gath gets upset with the men who have brought David to his palace and wants to know why they would do such a thing. He even ridicules them by asking if their weak little minds thought that perhaps the king didn't have enough **meshugga'im** (crazy people) running around the place!

David's ploy worked and he managed to save himself. But we're going to find out in the next chapter that God's plan was that David wasn't supposed to leave his country and seek a foreign nation for protection. Rather he was supposed to trust the Lord for his safety. Perhaps with Goliath's sword on his hip as a reminder, David would recall that amazing day in the Elah Valley not so long ago, when a smallish Shepherd armed with nothing but a sling and facing impossible odds, shouted to the enormous Philistine warrior who stood towering over him:

CJB 1 Samuel 17:45 "You're coming at me with a sword, a spear and a javelin. But I'm coming at you in the name of ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of the armies of Isra'el, whom you have challenged.

The Lord was not going to allow His anointed King to die before his time.

We'll take up 1st Samuel chapter 22 next time.