

## **On the Run Without My Wheaties**

**1 Samuel 21**

**By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)**

Chapter 21 — you'll remember that in the previous two chapters, 19 and 20, Saul's intention to kill David has now been seen. There have been six attempts on David's life and Jonathan and David in the middle of the 20th chapter, especially verses 14, 15, and 16, have made a formal covenant. Verse 16 - "Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David." This was a covenant of friendship, a covenant of loyalty. And you remember that Jonathan saw his father's intention, shot an arrow near to where David had been hiding, and then repeated that secret, coded message informing David that his life is now in dire straights and he needs to flee. David is in trouble, in danger for his life. "If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee" — we just sang that hymn written in 1641 and these are words appropriate I think for the text we have before us tonight. Now before we read chapter 21 let's look to God in prayer.

*Our Father, what a privilege it is to call You Father. You are the only God there is and we come before You as Your children. We come thankful for the provision of the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We pray tonight for insight and illumination. We pray especially that You would hide Your Word within our hearts that we may not sin against You. Help us to learn and profit from that which we read and study tonight that we might fall in love with Christ all over again. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy Word:

Then David came to Nob, or Nobe in Hebrew, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David trembling and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here." And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread — if the young men have kept themselves from women." And David answered the priest, "Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?" So the

priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen.

The David said to Ahimelech, "Then have you not here a spear or a sword on hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste." And the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it, for there is none but that here." And David said, "There is none like that; give it to me."

And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath. And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances, 'Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'" And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"

And the first verse of the next chapter:

"David departed from there and escaped."

Well, so far God's holy, inerrant Word.

### **Does God care about you?**

Does God care about you? Does He care about you, your predicament, your situation? The disciples asked that in the boat when they were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, you remember, was asleep and they woke Him up and they said, "Master, do You not care that we perish?" David finds himself in a situation where he may well be asking that question. He has been anointed king, secretly, by Samuel but Saul is now out to get him. He is a wanted man. He's on a hit list. Six times already Saul has tried to kill him and he's not done yet. He has to flee and leave his wife and friends and livelihood to flee for his life. Does God care? He has to flee, as my title suggests, without his Wheaties, without food.

He's gone in haste. He had been hiding you remember when Jonathan drew that arrow and made that secret announcement. And he's gone and he runs to this place, Nob. This is the replacement town for Shiloh. If you want to know where to find priests in abundance, Nob was the place to go. And Ahimelech is seemingly the Grand Poobah of all priests in this place. There are lots of other priests as well discover. Eighty five of them, at least, in the next chapter.

Now Ahimelech is the brother of Ahijah the priest. We met Ahijah the priest back in chapters 13 and 14 of 1 Samuel. Ahijah was in league to Saul. This is his brother. Both of them are great-grandsons to Eli. Can Ahimelech be trusted? If his brother is in league with Saul, what about Ahimelech? Can he be trusted? Can David just simply tell him everything? We're going to sit tonight like polite, or maybe impolite, critics of David, sitting in our comfortable pews asking ethical questions about what David does and says here. Was he right? Was he wrong? Was this morally correct or morally incorrect? Did he sin? Did he violate God's law? We almost have to ask these questions, but remember, most of us are not in David's position here.

Let's try and put ourselves in his sandals. With a price on your head, you don't know who you can trust. You don't know who you can trust.

Let's expand a little first of all on this ethical issue of truthfulness. What David says to Ahimelech. Remember, we've already addressed it in David's wife, Michal, when the soldiers, Saul's men, are coming to David's house, she says he's sick, he can't get up. She lies. I'm not with Hodge here. Charles Hodge, the great Princetonian theologian. He's an ethical absolutist. He says, "Michal didn't lie because those men weren't entitled to the truth." That's nice isn't it? That's worthy of Aquinas. That's Charles Hodge. That's his ethical absolutism.

I think I'm with James Warrick Montgomery on this one. I think I'm on the other side of this argument. Yes, she lied, but she had no choice. She had no choice. And later she would be obligated to confess her sin, but her life was at stake, it was David's life — it wasn't her life, it was David's life. We have a different case here. This is not the case of Nazis knocking on the door — "Do you have Jews in the basement, yes or no?" And your answer may well spell the death of others. This is not a time to say, "Let me consult Hodge for a minute." You've got a split second to answer that question. In this case here it's David's life.

Now, there are men that he talks about. We don't know whether or not the men were actually there or not, or whether the men joined him later. In the narrative it's only David. That's a different ethical situation. This is his life, not the life of someone else. It's one thing to protect someone else. It's another thing to protect one's self. He's alone and Ahimelech says to him, "Why are you here?" And he says, "I'm on a secret mission for the king." Very hush-hush. So hush-hush and so secret and so speedy he's come without a sword, which is rather odd. And he's come without his Wheaties. He has no food, which is rather odd. He must

have left in some haste to forget his food and a sword and probably some extra men and guards to boot. He asks Ahimelech for bread. Ahimelech apparently, seemingly, believes his tale. The only bread is the Bread of Presence. It's the show bread. It's the bread that's placed on the table in the tabernacle which is now here in this city of Nob. These are not little pancakes, you understand, these are three and half pound loaves according to the commentators. These are big loaves of bread and there would usually be ten of them and they're changed every Sabbath day and then at the end of each Sabbath this would be given to the priests to eat. He asks for five loaves of this bread. It would not be customary. It would not, on one interpretation, be legal to eat this bread. This was holy bread. But the priest makes a split second decision that argues that the law of ceremony is for the sake of man and not for the sake of God.

Now you remember, of course, this tale is cited by Jesus in Matthew chapter 12. The disciples have been plucking grain on the Sabbath day and there've been critics. There always are — critics of Sabbath casuistry — is it right to do “X” on Sunday, is it right to do “Y” on Sunday, is it right to do “Z” on Sunday? Is it right to pluck grain on Sunday, the Sabbath day, the Jewish Sabbath day? And Jesus cites this tale approvingly, that the law in this case was made for the provision of men.

If you interpret the law so as to appear mean, if you interpret the law so that you appear to be so rigid that it becomes in its application something destructive, then you've misunderstood the purpose and the nature of law, Jesus seems to be saying. Not once does Jesus give any indication that there's a basic moral, ethical problem in the story. Namely, that in order to get this bread in the first place David has told a whopper of a lie. He has told a tale that isn't true. Neither the author of Samuel nor Jesus in citing the passage leave us to believe that there's anything ethically wrong with it. They are silent about that. So David gets his bread.

Oh, and by the way, he says, “Do you have a sword?” He would have known the sword of Goliath was there. He was, after all, the man who had killed Goliath. And it was wrapped ceremoniously in a cloth hidden under the ephod in the tabernacle, a trophy of one great victory. “That will do,” David says. “I’ll take it. Give it to me.”

Let's hold off for a minute, can we, let's hold the thought that, “Did David tell a whopping great porker of a lie?” Let's hold that thought in our head but let's go on with the story for a second. I'll come back to that but hold that thought in your head for a minute.

David is in difficult circumstances. He needs food and he needs a sword. His life is in danger. What would you do? That's an interesting question isn't it? What would you do? Put yourselves in David's shoes for a minute. What would you do? Hold that thought because things get worse, because now, where does David

go? He goes to the land where Goliath comes from. He goes to King Achish of Gath, to a Philistine stronghold. What possesses him to do that? Desperation. Do you think the Philistines wouldn't recognize him? Of course they recognize him. They still remember the song that they had sung that "Saul had killed his thousands and David had killed his tens of thousands." This would be a perfect opportunity to kill him in revenge and they would have done it in an instant and David knew that. Now what that says is you've got to be desperate to do something as stupid as that. You've got to be desperate. David has no other choice, at least he doesn't think he has any other choice but to go into the very camp of the enemy, undisguised, with Goliath's sword to boot. What does he do? Well, he fakes madness. He lets spittle dribble down his beard, he writes scribbles, graffiti on the gates of the city. One more lunatic in Gath, and apparently there were lots of them. You see, there was a superstition about folk who were not in full control of their faculties — that the gods had touched them. David knew that. That was his exit. That was his safety net. To fake madness in the camp of your worst enemy, do you understand you have to be desperate? You have to be really desperate to do that.

There are two psalms and I want you to turn to them, written during this period or at least the first one was written during the period, and the second was written mediating on this period. The first is Psalm 56. Psalm 56 — "When I am afraid," David says, "I will trust in You." That's how it begins. Look at verse 3 of Psalm 56 — "When I am afraid, I will trust in You." You know, you could read 1 Samuel chapter 21 and think, "Here's a man who's utterly God-less. Here's a man who appears to be making decisions on the spur of the moment. Here's a man who is simply in survival mode doing desperate things in desperate situations." But Psalm 56 tells you the whole time, the whole time he's trusting in the Lord. That changes the picture a little, doesn't it? It changes the picture because it tells us that David, the whole time, when he's trying to get food from the priest Ahimelech, when he's faking madness before king Achish of Gath, all the time he is communing with his heavenly Father. "When I am afraid" — and he was afraid. He was afraid for his life. "When I am afraid I will trust in You."

Look at verse 8 of Psalm 56 — "You put my tears in a bottle." That's a piece of sentiment, isn't it, do catch someone's tears and put them in a bottle for keepsake? It's a tender picture. Do you remember the question I asked at the beginning tonight? Does God care? Tell me you've never asked that question when trouble has come to you, when sickness has come into your family, when your children have been hurt or scandalized some way at school, when you've lost your job and you say to yourself, "Does God really care about me?" Do you think David wasn't asking that question, "Does God care? How can You anoint me and then have six attempt on my life and now I'm on the run? Does He care?" He puts my tears in a bottle.

Look at verse 9, and hands up those who know where this is cited in the rest of the New Testament — "This I know, God is for me." Have you got it? "If God be

for us, who can be against us?” — Paul in Romans 8 is citing Psalm 56. This psalm that's written in this terrible context, in the most desperate circumstances, God is using David to produce this glory, this psalm. What good could come out of those circumstances? Well, Psalm 56 for a start and Romans 8 — didn't I say it was the best chapter in the Bible sometime recently? “If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son but freely delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not along with Him freely give us all things?” Psalm 56 was the point of inspiration for Paul by the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 11 of Psalm 56 — “In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” He wrote that in these circumstances. “I will trust in God, what can man do to me? What can Achish do to me? What can Saul do to me? I will trust in God.” Doesn't that change the story a little? You're not convinced.

Turn to Psalm 34, Psalm 34. This is written after the incident but it's meditating on this incident. David is thinking back on this time when he had to beg for food from Ahimelech and tell this story about being on a secret mission for the king. It's an acrostic psalm. Each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew Bible except for one letter. It's an acrostic psalm.

Look at verse 4 of Psalm 34 — “I sought the Lord, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” Beautiful isn't it, that in those circumstances, those terrible circumstances, this is what David learned? “I sought the Lord, and He delivered me.”

Look at verse 9 — “Fear the Lord” and I love the rendition of the Scottish Psalter here — “Fear the Lord and then you'll have nothing else to fear.” You know if you fear God you'll have nothing else to fear.

Look at verse 19 — “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.” And then, and it takes your breath away — “He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.” Now tell me you don't remember where that is cited in the rest of the New Testament. That's a prophecy about Jesus' crucifixion, that they didn't smash His legs on the cross. They stuck that spear in His side you remember but they didn't break His legs in fulfillment of this psalm which David wrote in these terrible circumstances. Do you see where this is heading? You're saying, “Why is God putting me in difficult circumstances? Why is God putting me in difficult circumstances?” Maybe to bring out in you something that can't be brought out except that you be placed in those circumstances. He puts you in a position where all you can do is put your trust in the living God and lean upon Him with all of your might. I find it breathtaking that this terrible circumstance, David could write two of the most glorious psalms in the Bible.

But you're still asking that question, I know you are, and you'll email me about it later. (laughter) Did David tell a whopper here, being on a secret mission for the

king? Curious, isn't it, that Jesus didn't cite any ethical problem with the incident. Curious, isn't it? Because, my friends, David was on a secret mission for the king. He was on a secret mission for the king. He had been anointed by Samuel as the king of Israel and he was ministering. Now his life was to be lived for the king. Do you not think David was capable of double entendre? Of course he was. I think I've read - you know I have thirty plus commentators on Samuel. I've read them all. Ninety percent of them chastize David. One or two of them gave him a rollicking, a no-holes-barred rollicking for what he did here. But you know, maybe David was simply telling the truth the whole time — "I'm on a secret mission for the king." Ahimelech didn't need to know anymore that he was. He wasn't entitled to any more than that. No one is entitled to all of the truth at every single moment at every possible time. We don't expect that of our soldiers. Deception is part of what they do. And it seems to me here that David finds himself in the most ethically difficult circumstance and in those circumstances he says he puts his trust in the Lord, every step of the way.

Does God care? Does God care about you - the thing that you're worried about, the thing that you're worried about, the thing that keeps you awake at night? Does God care? Of course He cares. He cares more than you and I could ever imagine. He cares so much He sends His Son to die for us on the cross, the cursed death of the cross. That's how much He cares.

That's what David learned here. One thing, one thing I know — God is for me. That's a great thing to know. God is for me. Let's pray together.

*Father we thank You tonight for the Scriptures. We thank You for this truth that You care for us. We thank You that You hide our tears in a bottle. We thank You that You sustain and keep and guard and protect. Even when we find ourselves in trouble, it is You who had led us and guided us and You promise never to leave us or forsake us. So as we begin this new week, with all of its circumstances and providences, we pray O Lord that we might sing that song, "One thing I know, You are for me." Receive our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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