

MURDER OF THE PRIESTS

1 Samuel 22:1-23

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The king said to the guard who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David" (1 Sam. 22:17).

No one ever stands still. This is true in many ways: we are getting older every minute, our health is improving or declining, and our wealth is either growing or lessening at all times. But this principle is especially true when it comes to our moral character and spiritual condition. The biblical principle is given by the apostle Paul, and it applies to matters both great and small: "whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

As we progress through the narrative of 1 Samuel, we find that King Saul is not standing still. He has been sowing: mainly unbelief, rebellion to God's Word, and mad hatred for faithful David. He has also been reaping an increasingly hardened conscience and a morally twisted character. Saul's sowing and reaping has advanced to the stage of utter apostasy. He has not succeeded in his maniacal attempts to slay David, but the now ever-present spear in his hand signifies the mortal wounds to his own spiritual condition. He has sown evil and has reaped the living hell of a warped soul.

Chapter 22 presents one of the last detailed depictions of Saul's heart, for after these events there will be little more to say about him. He has by now become wholly the servant of evil, Satan's chief agent in opposing God's plan of salvation. We will only focus on Saul's heart

condition once more, when in chapter 28 his Satan-serving impulse leads him to seek an occult medium's help in speaking with the dead. All that remains for Saul after that is a disgraceful death and then to face the holy God for final judgment and eternal condemnation. Saul is the prototypical apostate, whose self-willed choices led day-by-day, decision-by-decision, to an eternity in hell. The apostle John, writing about the coming of the final Antichrist, noted that "many antichrists have come" (1 Jn. 2:18). Saul became one of them and he pictures in concentrated form the destiny awaiting those who set their hardened hearts on the path of rebellion to God. In Saul's anti-David program we see another picture of the reign of sin, as the righteous are made outcasts, sacred things are defiled, and the wicked are unleashed in a mad frenzy of violence and death.

THE RIGHTEOUS MADE OUTCASTS

Upon realizing that Saul was intent on his death, David fled in a fearful rush that took him through Nob, where the priests ministered in the tabernacle, and to the Philistine city of Gath. Finally awakening to his folly, David returned to the wilderness region of Judea, halfway between Gath and Bethlehem, taking refuge in the extensive cave system at Adullam. This respite allowed David to gather his wits, and it is apparent that he communicated with his family. Noticing Saul's menacing surveillance of David's home, Jesse's household from Bethlehem fled to join David in the caves.

A person who has given himself over to sin will always fail to compartmentalize wickedness in a single portion of his or her life. Cheating will lead to lying, for instance, and lying will lead to falsely accusing, which leads to hatred and violence. Walter Chantry writes, "Injustice... becomes a way of life for authorities who begin to practice abusive measures."¹ We are spared the details of the spreading viciousness of Saul's rule, but there can be no doubt that his administration began to foster widespread injustice, corruption, and abuse.

As matters worsened, a growing number of people could not tolerate Saul's regime, becoming outlaws against the evil king, and it was

¹ Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, DATE), 70.

natural that they would seek out Saul's self-appointed rival, David: "everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became captain over them. And there were with him about four hundred men" (1 Sam. 22:2). This band of four hundred formed the nucleus of what would become David's kingdom, and it is noteworthy that in the providence of God it was Saul's injustice towards David that marked him as the leader for the faithful in Israel. How often it has been in history that God called forth leaders for his people by having them suffer persecution at the hands of the ungodly. David's skill would soon be displayed in making a disciplined and effective force out of this band of outcasts and refugees.

David's parents must now have been aged, and it seems that David was concerned to remove them to a place of safety. Therefore, "David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, 'Please let my father and my mother stay with you, till I know what God will do for me'" (1 Sam. 22:3). We are not told why the king of Moab was disposed to show kindness to David. Perhaps his status as a refugee from Saul gained him favor, and perhaps his generations-old Moabite heritage, through Ruth, helped as well.

What is evident in this brief episode is that David has experienced a spiritual revival. How backslidden he was in his mad flight from Saul, through Nob and to the hometown of Goliath in Gath! But notice now that he expresses his desire to discern God's will, asking the Moabites to keep his parents "til I know what God will do for me." Two of David's psalms are attributed to his period of refuge in Adullam, and they are both significant in telling of a renewed commitment to prayer and waiting on the Lord. Psalm 57:2 says, "I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me" (Ps. 57:2). Psalm 142:1-2 speaks similarly: "With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him."

The result in David's life of this renewed appeal to God in prayer and attentiveness to God's Word was the same as it is in ours: David's faith was strengthened and he began once more to discern in a spiritual and wise manner. He thus declares his conviction: "He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who

tramples on me. God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!” (Ps. 57:3).

The result of David’s strengthened faith is an eager willingness to obey God’s Word. We see this in the appearance of a prophet named Gad, who said to David, “Do not remain in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah.’ So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth” (1 Sam. 22:5). This kind of ready obedience to God’s Word is the mark of true and living faith. If we are to profess faith in David’s God, then we must be willing to obey as David did when the Bible speaks clearly to our lives. In the arrival of Gad the prophet to his refuge at Adullam, David must have seen a return of God’s favor for him. We likewise should treat God’s Word as the surest sign of his will for our blessing, so that we prize the Scriptures and eagerly believe and obey.

In contrast to David’s renewed faith and obedience, we see that Saul not only turns away from the Lord in hardened unbelief, but he can so little tolerate the righteous that he makes them outcasts. What a warning it should be when godly people no longer find your company wholesome. The path of worldliness and pride has its short-lived rewards, but the companionship of God’s holy people is not one of them. If you look upon serious, committed believers in Jesus as an annoyance and if your actions make it difficult for them to be near you, then you should contemplate your danger. Realize that such people have the blessing of God upon them, and therefore those who oppress them must dwell under the shadow of God’s wrath.

THE SACRED THINGS DEFILED

News of David’s movements inevitably came to the ears of a malicious ruler like Saul. He was holding court “at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height” (1 Sam. 22:6). Never at peace in his soul, Saul grasped his ever-present spear. His servants stood about him when he began fuming at the news regarding David. Saul raved, “Hear now, people of Benjamin; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me?” (1 Sam. 22:7-8). Faithless himself, Saul never imagines his followers acting out of simple loyalty and

honest duty. His only way of appeal is to use better carrots and a bigger stick. In virtuous David, Saul sees an increasingly ominous threat. Therefore he complained, “No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day” (1 Sam. 22:8). Self-pity and fear have totally gripped Saul’s heart: he can only be comfortable if those around him to feel sorry for him and enter into his warped conspiracy.

Most people who find themselves in service to a ruler like Saul are stunned and frightened by this kind of wild accusation. But there are others who see this as a golden opportunity. Such a person was Doeg the Edomite, who we met last chapter watching David at Nob with the priests. Doeg thus had actual news that would greatly interest the angry king: “Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, ‘I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the LORD for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine’” (1 Sam. 22:9-10).

Had Saul been in the least restrained by the commandments of God’s holy law, he would have inquired as to Doeg’s character and sought a second witness against the priests. The law required, “Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established” (Dt. 19:15). Saul, however, was no longer restrained by God’s Word and he did not hesitate to stretch out his hand to assail God’s holy priests.

Saul’s contempt for God is seen in his arrogant speech to Israel’s high priest, the nation’s second highest official: “Hear now, son of Ahitub,” he called to Ahimelech. The high priest answered, “Here I am, my lord” (1 Sam. 22:12) Saul replied, “Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?” (1 Sam. 22:14). Notice that Saul is angered that Ahimelech was performing what was merely his function as God’s servant. People likewise are outraged when Christian ministers preach the commands and doctrines of God’s Word, forgetting that this is the very function to which they are called by the Lord.

Ahimelech's answer reveals his innocence in ministering to David: "who among all your servants is so faithful as David," he asked, "who is the king's son-in-law, and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house? Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No!" (1 Sam. 22:14-15). It is possible that the priest sincerely did not realize that David was out of favor, though the priest may have simply been courageously confronting Saul over his well-known injustice to David. Confronting sin is part of the job for those called to preach God's Word. Ministers of the gospel are thus to speak God's truth without fear of man. Paul stated this principle as key to his ministry: "We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). In this same spirit, Ahimelech called Saul to a more sane and godly way of thinking and speaking: "Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little" (1 Sam. 22:15). The priests were totally uninvolved in any conspiracy against the king, and did not deserve his accusations.

It was precisely because Ahimelech's reply was so noble and true that it drove Saul into a murderous rage: "the king said, 'You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house'" (1 Sam. 22:16). Those who will not repent must instead attack the source of their reproach, and for having so clearly revealed Saul's unjust malice toward David the priest and his entire household must die.

Here we see a second sign that Saul's reign had wholly turned to Satanic evil: he shows no fear in defiling sacred things or assailing sacred persons. It either did not occur to Saul or he did not care that the priests were set apart by God for holy service to himself and that, therefore, violence against these men and their families would give special insult to the Lord.

Those who profane the sacred things of God end up doing true injury only to themselves. We observed this earlier in 1 Samuel when the ark of the covenant was placed in subjection to the idol of the Philistine god, Dagon. The result was the judicial execution of the Philistine deity and the divine judgment of a deadly plague upon the people. God not only preserves the holiness of his sacred truths and

institutions, but he often uses such unholy profaning as Saul's to stir up many to indignation. A famous example was the revolt of the Jewish people under the leadership of Judas Macabbeus after the Seleucid king Antiochus Epihanes displayed his arrogant contempt by profaning the holy-of-holies. In just this way, Saul's casual defiling of no less than the high priest's entire household must have stirred up the animosity of Levitical priests throughout Israel and aroused them to sympathy for David.

God preserved a single member of the high priest's house, his son Abiathar, who took the holy emblems of the high priesthood to David's camp. William Blaikie notes:

The very presence in his camp of Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, who escaped the massacre, with his ephod – an official means of consulting God in all cases of difficulty – would be a visible proof to his followers and to the community at large, that God was on his side... The feeling could not fail to gain strength that David's cause was the cause of God, and the cause of the country, and that, in due time, his patient sufferings and his noble services would be crowned with the due reward.²

Likewise, at a time like ours, when holy institutions like marriage are miserably defiled by both neglect and assault, Christians who uphold this divine institution in holiness and purity mark themselves as standing for God's cause in the world. The same is true for the true and uncorrupted teaching of the gospel, and the faithful administration of the sacraments in the church. Those who desire not only to seek God's blessing but who also wish to be known as those who stand for and rely on God's mighty grace will be all the more zealous to worship God "with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28) and to keep holy those holy things the Lord has committed to us.

THE WICKED UNLEASHED

Saul not only turned the righteous into outcasts and treated God's holy servants with contempt, but he took the final evil step of arming the wicked and unleashing their violence on the land. Despite the truthful explanation of no less than Israel's high priest,

² William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 348.

and despite the failure to produce more than a single witness, “the king said to the guard who stood about him, ‘Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me’” (1 Sam. 22:17). Imagine being one of Saul’s soldiers, who were mortified at the scene before them. Saul’s mad hatred for David was bad enough, but this wicked assault on innocent holy men was more than they could stomach. Therefore, “the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the LORD” (1 Sam. 22:17).

For Saul’s guards, passive opposition to an evil ruler inevitably collided with orders to commit grave sins against God’s law. The time had come when faithful Israelites would have to take a stand against evil or find themselves engaged in sacrilegious opposition to God. It is encouraging to learn that none of them were willing to “put out their hand to strike the priests of the LORD” (1 Sam. 22:17). This refusal to obey the king could not have failed to bring them trouble, but the words spoken later by Jesus Christ would undoubtedly have comforted them: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28).

Perhaps Saul lacked the power to take action against his guards, but he was able to find someone evil enough to obey his wicked demand: “Then the king said to Doeg, ‘You turn and strike the priests.’ And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; both man and woman, child, and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword” (1 Sam. 22:18-19). Thus was Saul’s descent into Satanic darkness utterly completed. Walter Chantry points out how far Saul had fallen: “Years earlier, Saul had not been able to bring himself to slay all the Amalekites and their cattle. Now he obliterated both priesthood and town. Not a soul was left but Abiathar who had escaped to give the account.”³

There seems never to be a shortage of Doegs, whom Satan and evil rulers can unleash on the world at large and especially against God’s

³ Walter Chantry, *David*, 74.

people. In the time of Jesus' birth, Herod sent his guards to Bethlehem to ruthlessly slay the boys under two years of age, desperately seeking to erase the Redeemer. It continues today. In the week of this writing alone, news has spread of a renewed persecution against Christians in China, with government-paid mobs descending on churches to smash property and assail worshipers, with many deaths. Meanwhile, behind the dark veil of Islam, news has come of increasing violence against Christian evangelists, even the dreadful kidnapping of Christian girls for forced marriage to abusive Moslem men.

Here in America, we should not doubt the readiness of Doegs to assail God's people, simply because such cold-hearted assailants are more likely to dress in the fine suits of attorneys or occupy desks in the government bureaucracy. A Christian attorney in Indiana was recently denied a license to practice law. Because of his known Christian beliefs, the state government required Bryan Brown to appear receive a psychological assessment. After he was asked about his beliefs regarding the final judgment, sexual morality, and biblical gender roles, Brown was declared psychologically unstable and thus unfit to practice the law.⁴ Meanwhile, national legislators feverishly labor even to craft legislation that will expand government funding for the clinical slaying of unborn children. In a world like ours, Christians will often have need to turn to God with words like those of David's prayer, uttered during this time of Saul's depraved oppression: "I cry to you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion, in the land of the living... Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me!'" (Ps. 142:5-6).

A REFUGE FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

News of the dreadful massacre at Nob reached David through the lone escapee, Abiathar, son of the high priest: "Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD" (1 Sam. 22:21). Now David's sin of speaking falsely to Ahimelech at the tabernacle was brought home with bitter clarity: "David said to Abiathar, 'I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that

⁴ Cited from *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, Dec. 10, 2009.

he would surely tell Saul. I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house" (1 Sam. 22:22).

It may not have given David much comfort, but readers of First Samuel know that the death of these priests was not merely the result of David's sin but also of God's curse on the earlier sins of the negligent high priest Eli and his wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas. God in his wrath foretold to Eli: "Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off our strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house" (1 Sam. 2:31). God promised that only one descendant of Eli's would be spared "to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men" (1 Sam. 2:33).

It would not have comforted David to learn that in his sin he had been achieving God's foreordained judgment on Eli's house. Nor does it lessen our guilt for sin that God sovereignly overrules our affairs for his own purposes. William Blaikie urges:

What a warning this conveys to us! Are you not sometimes tempted to think that sin to you is not a very serious matter, because you will get forgiveness for it, the atoning work of the Saviour will cleanse you for its guilt? Be it so; but what if your sin has involved others, and if no atoning blood has been sprinkled on them?... Alas, alas! Sin is like a network, the ramifications of which go out on the right hand and on the left, and when we break God's law, we cannot tell what the consequences to others may be!⁵

Now David realizes his calling as the true anointed king over Israel: no longer would his mind be absorbed only with personal fears and concerns, but with the duty for the people that had been thrust upon him. "Stay with me," he tells Abiathar; "do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me, you shall be in safekeeping" (1 Sam. 22:23). How could David make such a statement, except that he now – perhaps having no other choice – laid his hands upon God's promise of the kingship? Previously, Jonathan had played the role of encouraging David to believe in God's promised salvation (see 1 Sam. 20:2). Now, the providence of God in Saul's unrestrained fury compelled David to advance into true faith in embracing his calling.

⁵ Blaikie, *1 Samuel*, 350.

In this offer of salvation, David most truly typifies the saving work of Jesus Christ. David would succeed in protecting Abiathar and many others who sought safety with him. Yet David himself knew that only the Lord can be the true refuge for the righteous. That is why David prayed from his cave, with grateful thanks for the protection only God can provide: “For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds” (Ps. 57:10).

As Jesus pointed out, the refuge that we need is not primarily from the Sauls of the world, who can only kill the body, but from God’s just wrath on our sin, which threatens our souls with eternal damnation. For this greatest danger, God himself has provided the refuge in sending his Son, Jesus Christ to die in sacrifice for our sins. Romans 6:23 urges us: “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus declared, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). The writer of Hebrews thus assures us that in God’s covenant promise of salvation in Christ, “we who have fled for refuge... have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18).

Therefore, as the refugees of Adullam came streaming into David, we must flee for refuge to the cross of Christ, where sin was atoned, forgiveness was attained, and where salvation is dispensed to those who trust in God’s Son. Like David’s band of outcasts, fleeing to Christ follows upon our dissatisfaction with the pleasures and rewards of this evil world. Since we are all born as sinners under Satan’s reign, we must all experience the discontent of these refugees if we are to find safety in the grace of God in Christ, leaving all to follow Jesus. Roger Ellsworth comments:

It is, to be sure, a most costly decision. Those who left Saul’s kingdom to join David left behind many comforts and conveniences and entered into a life that entailed sacrifice and suffering, but the peace and joy of being a follower of David far surpassed the hardships involved. So it is for all those who, by the grace of God, leave Satan’s kingdom for Christ’s.⁶

⁶ Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King* (Ross-Shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 73.

Jesus invites us all to flee to him for salvation, calling out to the world, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28).

Meanwhile, we are reminded that in even the darkest hours, when Satan seems most powerfully ascendant over the world, God always preserves a remnant of faith that is precious to him. Do you still hold your citizenship in the world? If you do, you may be able to exult in its apparent success in flaunting God’s rule. But realize that you, like Saul, must inevitably advance in the ways of evil and the corruption of your soul. In time, the pleasures of sin will be dulled into a miserable bondage and its wages will be death (Rom. 6:23). You can flee to Jesus Christ, the rival to the worldly despot, who has triumphed over sin through his cross. Jesus assures his beleaguered remnant of protection and provision. “In the world you will have tribulation,” Jesus admitted. “But take heart,” he exhorts us; “I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

This chapter began with David’s followers looking like little more than a rabble. But by the end of the chapter God had summoned David to embrace the kingship and provided him with both a priest and a prophet. These represent our great need: to be defended by a mighty king, reconciled to God’s favor by an atoning priest, and instructed into faith and salvation by a true prophet. This is the refuge of God’s people in this world: the kingly reign of God’s mighty Son, Jesus; the priestly ministry of Christ’s his sin-atoning blood, and the prophetic ministry of the Holy Scriptures, by which Jesus the Good Shepherd gathers and feeds his flock for salvation. “I am the door,” Jesus said. “If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9).