

# UNHOLY FLIGHT

1 Samuel 21:1-15

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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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’” (1 Sam. 21:2).

Occasionally, you will hear the name of a place that seems strangely familiar. You cannot quite place it, but it seems to you that you have been there before. Most Christians should respond this way to a reading of 1 Samuel 21. We hear the name “Nob,” and ask, “Haven’t I been there?” We read of “Gath,” and ponder, “Isn’t that a place I have visited?”

I say this not because most Christians have physically visited Palestine, where these ancient sites were located. Instead, we have frequented the spiritual reality that they represent. Nob is the place of David’s unholy flight of fear, and Gath is the city of David’s mad refuge. Few who have sought to follow Jesus Christ for any length of time have avoided these travel stops; most of us can recognize from our own experience the bitter taste of what they represent. Fortunately, God also knows Nob and Gath very well, and he knows not only how to rescue his people from them but also to use these places to challenge and mold our faith. As we study David’s flight through Nob and refuge in Gath, we will not only consider the folly of a believer gripped by fear, but we will learn, as Dale Ralph Davis writes that “even in their most desperate moments [the Lord] does not let go of his servants, least of all David, his king-elect.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 174.

## DAVID'S FEARFUL FLIGHT THROUGH NOB

David was facing a different kind of challenge than the clear and obvious danger he earlier mastered in the Philistine giant, Goliath. The new threat to David's life, this time from Israel's own king Saul, was one that brought David to the brink of desperation. He had appealed to the friendship of Saul's son for protection, but Jonathan had been unable to stay his father's wrath. David then took refuge with Samuel and his prophets in Ramah, but Saul had tracked him there. Learning from Jonathan that Saul was utterly determined to see him dead, David fled precipitously, taking off, it seems, with little more than the shirt on his back.

David's first stop was not far away: the priestly compound at Nob, a location about two miles south of Saul's home in Gibeah. Having appealed to the king's son and then to the prophets for his safety, David seems now to turn to the third institution of Israel: the priests. After the fall of Shiloh, the priests had evidently moved the tabernacle to Nob, although the ark of the covenant remained in Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam. 6:2; 2 Sam. 6:3). David probably never intended to hide out so near to Saul at Nob, but he may have gone to inquire of the Lord and receive whatever help the priests might provide. Although he seems overly charitable to David given the tenor of this chapter, it is worth mentioning Matthew Henry's suggesting that David may have fled to Nob in part because of affection: "He had given an affectionate farewell to his friend Jonathan, and cannot go till he has given the like to the tabernacle."<sup>2</sup>

When David arrived, however, he was unnerved by the demeanor of the priest: "Ahimelech came to meet David trembling" (1 Sam. 21:1). Evidently, news of Saul's hatred for David had spread so as to make people nervous about the fugitive. The priest not only met David with shaking hands and a sweaty face, but he immediately quizzed David: "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" (1 Sam. 21:1).

We can understand why it was surprising to see a man of David's high office unattended by an official retinue. But the abrupt greeting could only have conveyed hesitancy regarding David's status, and

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:308.

this seems to have unnerved David. His faith and composure were already shaken (see 1 Sam. 20:3), but now he began to falter. Back in Gibeah, David had resorted to a lie (1 Sam. 20:6), and now at Nob he again turns to falsehood. He answered, “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” (1 Sam. 21:2-3). In other words, David claimed to be on a secret mission from King Saul, with his men hidden away nearby.

There is no point, as some commentators have tried, in putting a positive face on David’s false speaking, for which he can have no real excuse. David’s lying is in fact getting worse, since now he straight-facedly deceives a holy priest of the Lord while present in God’s holy tabernacle. This is what happens when our minds are overthrown by fear. When we have forgotten God’s faithfulness and love, we easily fall into patterns of sin.

Jesus’ commentary on this passage in Matthew 12:3-4 suggests that David did have at least some companions, and they may have indeed been hidden nearby, but he was absolutely not on a mission from King Saul. Just as with his previous lie, told by Jonathan to Saul, this false statement accomplished nothing positive and had several harmful results. A. W. Pink writes, “Though ingenious falsehoods may seem to promote present security, yet they insure future disgrace.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if helping David was likely to bring Ahimelech into danger, the priest had a right to know. David would have done well to disclose the truth and seek the priest’s prayers and advice: it is hard to imagine godly counsel and prayer resulting in the actions that David went on to take. I have learned in pastoral ministry that Christians who are walking closely with the Lord come to see their pastor seeking prayer and counsel *before* an important decision. Christians who are pulling away from the Lord usually conceal their plans, and afterwards see their pastor seeking forgiveness for the actions that they knew were wrong all along.

In chapter 22, we learn that Ahimelech did inquire of the Lord for David (vv. 10, 15), even though David had not posed an honest

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<sup>3</sup> A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, ), 1:76.

question. David's main interest was in provision rather than counsel: "Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here" (1 Sam. 21:3).

David's request posed a problem, since the only food available at the tabernacle was consecrated bread which sat on the table of showbread in the Holy Place and which was to be eaten only by the priest and his family (see Leviticus 21). Ahimelech said, "I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread" (1 Sam. 21:4). The priest was willing to give this bread to David, but imposed requirements that would call for a minimum of consecration on the part of David and his men, namely, that they must "have kept themselves from women" (1 Sam. 21:4). This prohibition does not represent a biblical notion that sexual intimacy is inherently wicked, for the Bible sees God-given sex within marriage as a great good and blessing. Nonetheless, the Levitical holiness code considered the loss of all bodily fluids a sign of uncleanness (see Lev. 15:18; cf. Ex. 19:15). Fortunately for David, he and whatever men were with him had met this qualification, and David stated that this was a standard policy for his missions: "Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition." Referring to the holy status of their bodies, he added, "The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today" – that is, a day when they would visit the tabernacle – "will their vessels be holy?" (1 Sam. 21:5). At this, "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" (1 Sam. 21:6).

Jesus once made a point about the Sabbath day by referring to this episode. The Pharisees had accused Jesus and his disciples of violating the Sabbath because they picked and ate grain as they walked through a field. Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" (Mt. 12:3-4). Jesus point was not, as some scholars assert, that the greater obligation of mercy overrode the mere observance of God's law. No such contradiction, in fact, exists.

Rather, Jesus meant that the intent of the law was fulfilled by the act of mercy. Gordon Keddie explains, “The true meaning of the ceremonial law of the showbread was expressed in its being given to David as an act of compassion and mercy providing for real need; the law was fulfilled, rather than superseded.”<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry states: “Believers are spiritual priests, and the offerings of the Lord shall be their inheritance; they eat the bread of their God.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus thus explained to the Pharisees, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would have not condemned the guiltless” (Mt. 17:7). Our Lord’s reference to this passage should inform our Sabbath observance today and warn us against rules that make the Lord’s Day a burden. We necessarily fulfill the law as we use means properly to equip and enrich God’s people for service to Christ’s kingdom.

Two last notes are made regarding David’s brief passage at Nob. The first was the presence of a menacing figure named Doeg the Edomite, a servant of Saul who had been detained at the tabernacle and witnessed David’s visit. Later, David will admit that he knew that Doeg would report the visit to Saul and that the priests would be harmed for it, yet he did nothing to intervene (see 1 Sam. 22:22). The second was David’s request for a weapon, saying that he had left in haste and thus unequipped. He received the sword of Goliath which had been deposited in the tabernacle (probably as a sort of trophy of God’s victory). Ahimelch 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” (1 Sam. 21:9). It says much that the same David who refused to wear the armor of Israel’s king when he was filled with the Spirit for his battle with Goliath now rejoices to wield the weapon of his former pagan enemy. No longer relying on God’s strength, he exulted in the sword, saying, “There is none like that, give it to me.”

Thus was David’s passage through Nob, which became for him a place where fear gave way to sin, unbelief, and worldliness. At Nob,

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 196.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 2:309.

David sought to protect himself with a lie, permitted his behavior to endanger others, and exulted in the worldly weapons he acquired. How much better it would have been if the sight of Goliath's sword had reminded David of how God had earlier answered his faith, and how willing God is to help those who call on his name.

### DAVID'S MAD REFUGE IN GATH

**T**he best commentary on David's unbelieving passage through Nob is the destination to which it led him. Like David, whenever we pass through our Nob, engaging in willful, unbelieving, flight from obedient faith in God, we are likely to place ourselves in spiritually unprofitable settings. We may not be surprised that David's flight brought him to an ungodly place, but we are surprised that he would actually flee to Goliath's hometown of Gath! Yet that is where David went: "David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath" (1 Sam. 21:10).

This account is briefer than that of David at Nob, and involves an uncomplicated outcome. David probably fled to Gath to remove himself from Saul's domain. He may have thought that being an enemy of Saul would gain him asylum among the Philistines. He had forgotten, however, that he was himself the main source of Philistine woes and the slayer of their soldiers. (If David had forgotten the two hundred Philistine foreskins, the people of Gath had not!) No sooner did David enter the city than people recognized him and complained in alarm to king Achish: "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'?" (1 Sam. 21:11).

David's ten thousand *Philistines*, that is! Adding insult to injury, David had the audacity to stroll into town wearing the sword of their hero whom he had slain, and with which David had cut off Goliath of Gath's head!

David's fearful flight had brought him to a place of refuge that turned out to be even more threatening to him than mad king Saul! He realized this immediately: "David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath" (1 Sam. 21:12). Completely out of other options, David resorted to a last desperate tactic: "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” (1 Sam. 21:13). In God’s providence, David’s willful folly is mocked: any plan that results in one having to let spit drool down his beard is not one that has gone well! David’s actions are of course a commentary on his own state of mind: his actions had been crazy and now it was appropriate that he acted that way. We also remember Saul’s madness, and we see that by joining Saul on the path of unbelief and sin, David was starting to resemble even his nemesis. Roger Ellsworth comments: “The man who stood calmly before Goliath because he was possessed with faith now acts like a maniac because he is possessed with fear.”<sup>6</sup>

The only positive thing to say about David’s desperate action was that it worked. Achish’s response to the news is almost comical: “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?” (1 Sam. 21: 14-15). Achish probably held the common ancient superstition that harming lunatics brought bad luck. Mainly, however, he had enough crazy people already and did not need one more around in David. This was no compliment to a man anointed by God as Israel’s future king – and it shows the shame into which sin will bring anyone – but it did allow David to escape.

#### WARNINGS FROM NOB AND GATH

**H**ow can we explain David’s unholy conduct? He was being driven by fear, but David had faced fear before. Probably, he had drunk from the poison serum of self-pity, thus rationalizing his sin and willful folly. He had not asked to be anointed by Samuel, but he had still served Saul faithfully. What had been the result? He was being ruthlessly hounded by a mad king! He had great promises from God, but so little providence of them. No doubt the true injustice of his situation tore David’s heart. The psalms he later wrote about this period of his life indicate that he was broken-hearted over his treatment and “crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18). Instead of taking these ailments to the Lord, however, David seems to have nurtured them to

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King* (Ross-Shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 62.

the detriment of his own heart. Panicked, bitter, and weary, David fled from the way of faith that his self-pity saw as the root of his trouble. As such, God's Word never figures into David's schemes, and he never stops fleeing long enough to pray for God's help in composing his frayed nerves. Passing through Nob, David permitted himself the indulgence of sin, and ending up in Gath, the madness of his flight was ultimately revealed.

We can profitably discover four warnings for believers in David's conduct. The first is that *our unbelieving sins have real consequences*. David's lie to Ahimelech exposed the priest to a danger that would be fully realized in the near future. Like David at Nob, we may cover our sins with successful lies, but the sin we thus protect will inevitably harm us and others. We may neglect clear duties as Christians, spouses, and parents – especially our duty to prayer and the regular study of God's Word – but in time we will join the ranks of those who regretfully survey the wreckage in our homes and lives. We may commit ourselves to worldly values and ambitions, just as David gloated over possession of Goliath's sword. But the money, prestige, and pleasure that we gain will only result in the gloom that David experience in Gath. This is enemy territory, and no servant of God can abide their safely! Even after believers have repented and been restored to God, the consequences of Nob and Gath may remain painfully real.

Second, David's behavior warns us that *any believer can become backslidden*, by giving ear to the counsel of fear, unbelief, and self-pity. David was a very great servant of God, a man of towering spiritual qualities. Here is the man who could be called "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). But the best of men are men at best, and David could no more safely indulge in unbelief and sin that we can. Looking at such an example, Paul counsels us, "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). It was with this in mind that Jesus taught us urgently to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13).

A third warning reminds us not only that any of us can fall, but also *how far we can fall and how fast it can happen*. Only recently, David had been faithfully serving in Saul's court and leading Israel's armies valiantly in battle. Now he is slobbering in a corner of Goliath's



hometown. This is why the Bible tells us always to consider both God's grace and our duty. Hebrews 3:12 especially urges us to beware any hardness in our hearts toward God: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."

Fourth, David shows us that *even very godly people will struggle with doubts, fears, resentments, and broken hearts*. This is why we need Christian friends, on whom we may rely for counsel, sympathy, and prayer. Notice that David's struggles occur in tandem with his separation from his covenant friend Jonathan. This is also why God provides elders and pastors in the church. Ahimelech may not have handled himself perfectly when David appeared at the tabernacle, but David still could have opened his heart and sought biblical encouragement from such a man of God. It is because of our need for similar pastoral guidance that God places Christians into congregations, under the spiritual oversight of elders, whom God has appointed to keep "watch over your souls" (Heb. 13:17).

#### "TASTE AND SEE"

The apostle Paul wrote that the mistakes of the Old Testament were recorded as "examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6). Once David departed from Gath and regained his safety, he too reflected on this low period of his life, and in Psalms 34 and 56 he recorded his thoughts, which focus mainly on God. Having considered lessons about ourselves from David's flight, we can also note four truths about God's dealings with his people.

The first lesson is that *God provides for his people in all their needs*. We are shown this in the giving of bread to David from God's table in the tabernacle. David wrote in Psalm 34:9-10, "Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing." Ralph Davis comments: "We note that in the confusion and danger and fear David received his daily bread." The loaves from God's table were "a quiet witness that [the Lord] sustains and people and supplies their needs."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Davis, *1 Samuel*, 176.

Do you find yourself under a heavy load of worry and cares? Do you sometimes think you will crumble under the pressure? Look, then, to God's daily provision and remember that just as God did not cast off David in his folly and sin, God will remain faithful to you.

Second, David comments on how *God protects his people in danger*. This is the main point on which David dwells in these psalms. Psalm 34:6-8 recalls: "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 delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"

David realized that in his lowest moments, God's unseen help was still protecting him. Psalm 56 offers the most obvious application of this realization, namely, that when David is afraid he should remember to trust in God: "In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" (Ps. 56:4). The second application is that while trusting God, we must then obey his laws and commands: "I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death" (Ps. 56:12-13). It is noteworthy, that David focuses on truthfulness in speech as a fruit of faith in God's protection: "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:13-14).

God not only protected David from Saul and the king of Gath, but God also protected David from his own sin. David intended to conceal his identity among the people of Gath, but, A. W. Pink writes, "God will not allow His people to remain incognito in this world." Thus, David was quickly recognized, just as a true believer in Christ will not be able to blend in unnoticed with the world. "And mercifully is this the case, for God will not have His own to settle down among and enjoy the friendship of His enemies."<sup>8</sup> Whenever God refuses to grant success to our sinful schemes, we should praise him for protecting us from becoming permanently entangled in evil.

Third, we learn from David's experience about *God's pedagogy*, that is, his wise training of his children. Not only was David doing things in this chapter but God was acting, too. If David lost his grip on God,

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<sup>8</sup> Pink, *Life of David*, 74.

it was in part because God seems to have withdrawn his presence temporarily as a way of testing and training David's faith. Knowing the challenges that lay ahead of David, it seems that the Lord arranged this experience, in which David would learn his weakness and need of constant grace. The resulting wisdom is seen in Psalm 34:4, in which David reflects, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears." Few of us daily seek the Lord until by painful experience we have learned our peril apart from God.

Fourth, David was persuaded through these experiences, and by God's deliverance of him in Gath, of *God's pity towards those who belong to him*. He wrote in Psalm 34:17-18, "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." David erred by not taking his distress to a believing friend or a pastor, but there is a more ready help than these: the pity of God for his people.

The answer to self-pity, which bears the ill-fruit of so many dark thoughts and justifies so many destructive sins, is to seek God's pity in prayer. Most touching, perhaps, is David's statement in Psalm 56, written after these events, in which David notes the loving care with which God treats each of our sorrows. "You have kept count of my tossings," David sighs. He asks, "Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" (Ps. 56:8). The Lord who loved us so much as to send his Son to die for our sins is also tender with balm for every wound on our hearts. As Charles Wesley's hymn counsels us, "Jesus, Lover of my soul / Let me to thy bosom fly."<sup>9</sup>

## A GREATER THAN DAVID

**D**avid's sufferings have the ultimate purpose of foreshadowing the greater sufferings of God's true anointed king, the Messiah.

Likewise, David's psalms, which often express a spiritual keenness higher than he seems to have personally possessed, more truly reflect the faith and devotion of his greater son, Jesus Christ. It is, in fact, God's grace for us in Christ that answers our fear and need

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," 1740.

in times of trouble. “In the world you will have tribulation,” Jesus said. “But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

David received provision from the sacred bread of the tabernacle. But Jesus is the true bread that meets our greatest need. He said: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn. 6:51). Likewise, David could praise God for his protection in sparing him from death. But God’s greater protection in Jesus Christ protects us even in death. David’s rejoicing in Psalm 34 applies most pointedly to Christ’s sin-redeeming death on the cross: “The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned” (Ps. 34:22). Finally, God’s pity for his suffering people is most perfectly manifested in the coming of Jesus into our world. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus thus gives all-sufficient grace for our every need:

Thou, O Christ, art all I want,  
More than all in Thee I find;  
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,  
Heal the sick, and lead the blind.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus being so willing for all this and more, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,” the pastor of Hebrews urges us, “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.