
The Fugitive

1 Samuel 21²⁰

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The TV series and the movie, *The Fugitive*

Unjustly accused and fleeing...

Who do you cheer for?

David is on the run from Saul

Good bye to his best friend, Jonathan

You really want to support David, but...

Is David a disappointment?

Is David deceitful?

The fugitive moves through two confrontations: a Jewish priest and a Gentile king,

The Jewish Priest

(v. 1-9)

The first is the priest who served during Saul's early reign.

¹ Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David trembling and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" ² 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. ³ Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here." ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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?" ⁶ So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was

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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.

The significance of this episode is largely lost on us. We do not live under the Law. We do not know the Levitical system well. To the ordinary Jew, this would have been both shocking and baffling.

Fearful Confrontation

(v. 1-2)

David's flight brings him just a few miles to a place called Nob. The Tabernacle has been pitched there and the priests have settled there (1 Samuel 22:19). Ahimelech is the chief priest. He comes out to meet David. He is so afraid he is trembling. One author has noted this word through 1 Samuel.

Ahimelech "trembled" at the approach of David as his great-grandfather had "trembled" on the day the ark of God was lost, as the people of Israel had "trembled" before the Philistines, as the Philistines had in their turn "trembled" before the Israelites, and as the elders of Bethlehem had "trembled" when Samuel came on his secret mission (1 Samuel 4:13; 13:7; 14:15; 16:4; cf. 28:5). In other words, the term indicates a profound fear. Terror would not be too strong a word for what Ahimelech felt as he saw David approach. (Woodhouse, pp. 408-409)

It is almost certain that Ahimelech through David was a fugitive from Saul. News of Saul's attempts on David's life would have traveled fast, particularly among the religious leaders; that is, the prophetic band and Samuel to Ahimelech the high priest. Further, David is known as a warrior. It is likely he is decked out in his fighting gear. All this together strikes terror into Ahimelech's heart.

David seeks to allay the priest's fears. David tells him what appears to be a total fabrication. He has been sent by the king on a secret mission and is on his way to meet his young men. The young men are so loosely identified they could be almost anyone: a group of friends, a team picked by David or Saul, or young recruits to David's military band.

Unlawful Provision

(v. 3-6)

David wants food to feed himself and these so-called young men. What he really wants is several days sustenance as he flees. If he can get provision here, he will be able to travel without having to stop for additional provisions. So he asks for provision. The priest has no normal bread immediately available. Since this is a whole city of priests and families where provision could have been gotten, there is a sense of urgency for the fugitive. The only provision he has under his control is the bread from the table of showbread in the Tabernacle. This was the bread that had been consecrated, set aside for use in the tabernacle. These were the twelve loaves baked according to the regulations in Leviticus 24:5-9. These loaves were, according to the Law, to be arranged on the table in the tabernacle every Sabbath day (Leviticus 24:8). It is likely then this is the Sabbath when David came to Nob. This was consecrated bread and was to be eaten by the priests in a holy place (Leviticus 24:9).

If Ahimelech is going to give this bread to David, he wants assurance that the “vessels” of the young men are clean. There is much debate about what is being referred to. Is it their bodies or is it their equipment of war? Well, if it is their war equipment it is hard to imagine why David’s response about being kept from women makes sense. Except, this whole conversation is a charade. I think Ahimelech knows it. This is for the ears of others who will eventually report back to Saul. Ahimelech gives this bread of the Presence to David since his vessel is clean.

The bread is for the priests but David eats. There is no condemnation of David’s actions. There is no condemnation of Ahimelech giving him the bread. This is not an intrusion into the priesthood, the rebellion that got Saul dethroned. A careful reading of Leviticus 24:9 does not forbid others from eating it. Rather, it will be eaten by the priests rather than discarded. So the merciful provision by Ahimelech may entirely be within the Law as long as those eating it are also in the covenant and consecrated.

Now, if this story were just a narrative about a priest and a fugitive some morning and the giving of religious bread to feed the hungry man, then the Israelite and the Christian moralist reading this is going to have difficulty. But this story is more than that. Does the New Testament shed any light in this text? Yes, Jesus refers back to this text in Luke 6:1-5.

¹ On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” ³ And Jesus answered them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?” ⁵ And he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

The stories are connected by both being stories about providing for hungry followers in a way that was perceived as being unlawful. Two important observations help us.

Jesus identifies himself with the pursued and persecuted David. The period of David’s flight from Saul and his living and serving in obscurity anticipate the years of Jesus’ time on earth. Both have been anointed the true king but have not yet been recognized as king. Both were hated, pursued and suffered at the hands of the leaders of their day.

Jesus asserts that He is Lord of the Sabbath. He is over, not under the Law and the sign of the Covenant. He is the true King. The implication is that David’s actions in taking the showbread from the holy place was parallel to Jesus’ disciples partaking of the grain. The disciples were doing what was allowed by Deuteronomy 23:25. The problem is not that they were stealing, but that they were harvesting on the Sabbath. What they did was an allowed act of mercy.

I think there are connections. Jesus and the disciples were acting within the mercy granted even under the Old Testament law and framework. The Laws were not pure

black and white. They had exception and modifiers. And so, Ahimelech was acting in the mercy of God. He was providing for a fugitive. Yes, there is all kinds of questionable if not sinful deceptions and charades. But the future king is in need and the Lord has made provision for mercy. Let mercy reign over Law.

Paul tells us that the stories and lives of the Old Testament were ordered and recorded for us in the New Testament. They were written as instruction and as illustration. Jesus recognized that in his responses to the Pharisees. Jesus declares that He is Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who frames and fulfills the Sabbath. But He is also the One who actually is the bread of life, the one who is what the bread of the tabernacle represented. David's receiving that bread helps us to see how he is a type of the true King, the Lord Jesus.

Ominous Observer

(v. 7)

Standing in the shadows is an ominous observer.

⁷ 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 herdsman.

This certain man was a servant of Saul. He was the head of all of Saul's herdsman. This made him a very, very important person. He had been held or detained at Nob presumably by the priests probably because of the Sabbath. He was an Edomite. This means he was part of a people group descendent from Esau. They had gone out against Israel when Israel was traveling to the Promised Land. This act earned them the wrath of God and judgment. They were not allowed to become Jewish proselytes. Yet here is Doeg, the Edomite, the overseer of Saul's herdsman.

He is standing in the shadows watching. No good can come of this.

Surprising Armament

(v. 8-10)

The next request is surprising as well.

⁸ Then David said to Ahimelech, "Then have you not here a spear or a sword at hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste." ⁹ 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."

So he has come unarmed. He was in the field with Jonathan and came straight to Nob without going home to collect provisions and weapons. He needs a spear and a sword. Is there one near he can borrow? All they have is the sword of Goliath, It has been wrapped in a cloth and hidden where the ephod was stored.

You can almost see the gleam in David's eye. How ironic. He won the sword as inexperienced youth. Now he will carry the sword as a much accomplished warrior.

The Gentile King

(v. 10-15)

From his best friend, to a helping priest, David then flees into a foreign country.

Fearful Recognition

(v. 10-11)

¹⁰ And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath. ¹¹ 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'?"

The text here literally says he fled from the presence of Saul. At this point the power and danger from Saul were everywhere in Israel. David leaves Israel and goes to Gath. Gath is about 25 miles from Nob but is not under the control of Saul. There he seeks asylum with the Gentile king, Achish.

Now this is either daring or rash. Gath is one of the seven cities of Philistia. Achish is a Philistine king. What a statement this is! David feels safer with the Philistines than he does with Saul. Maybe he thinks this will be the last place Saul would look for him. It certainly is not a place Saul is going to be able to get at David.

Well, I wonder if he appears in the court of Achish with the sword of Goliath hanging from his belt? Now that would have been interesting. But the court attendants and king's servants recognize David. More than that, they question what he is doing in Gath.

Isn't this Goliath-killer? Isn't this Philistine-butcher? Isn't this the slaughterer of thousands upon thousands of Philistines? Isn't this the celebrated warrior of Israel? Isn't this the darling of the maidens of Israel?

Crafty Deception

(v. 12-13)

¹² And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. ¹³ 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.

Well what did he think was going to happen? The Philistines would welcome him with open arms? Or that he would not be recognized? He is probably on the Philistine Ten Most Wanted list. And now he is afraid?

Fear can cause us to do amazing things. It can also cause us to do appalling things. David, in fear, pretends to be insane. He probably already looks the part having been on the run. Shaggy, tired, maybe unkempt, maybe haggard. He drools in his beard. He shambles around the court. He scratches nonsense onto the door posts. He is helpless and harmless and maybe, just a little hopeless.

Haughty Dismissal

(v. 14-15)

¹⁴ Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? ¹⁵ 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?"

Achish is on to David. There is an irony here.

It is insane for David to be in the court of the Philistines. Achish may well be saying, "Yes, the man is mad. He has lost his mind to come here to Philistia."

Achish is also saying, "Do I not have enough crazy people around me?" This accompanied by significant looks at his attendants and servants. What is Achish supposed to do with him?

Achish seems to recognize the charade. "He is behaving or better, playing at, being the madman. He wants to dribble in his beard, let him mess up someone else's floor. And he's messing up all the fine woodwork around the court. Don't bring this drooling, scrabbling fool to me."

Is this last phrase a reference to David's friendship with Jonathan and marriage to Michal? Is Achish saying there is no way David is going to worm his way into Achish's household?

Achish seems to be turning these statements on their head. David, in his view, is still a dangerous man. But not as a brave warrior, as a crafty, deceiving toady.

Well, our future king is a pretty dismal, desolate figure at this point. And it is about to get worse... 1 Samuel 22:1

¹ David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam...

Reflect and Respond

Huge questions for a thoughtful believer.

Why is David portrayed this way?

Are David's lies sins?

What do you tell your children?

This is an important time in David's life. We tend to see this as a dark period on the run and struggling to survive. Frankly, it gets old. It is hard to see the significance. But this period is important for several reasons:

It is a time of maturing for David...

It is a time of gathering a loyal following who will become the core of his army...

It is a time of testing where David's commitment to wait on God to elevate him to the throne...

It is a time in which David wrote at least seven songs that are in the Psalms. Many of those Psalms speak of the difficulty of his situation and the distress of his heart. He often cries out to the Lord for help and hope.

Sometimes we get to take direct flights from an Old Testament text to Jesus; sometimes, we have to stop and have a layover in another text first. So our itinerary takes through another text. The most significant of the songs from this period is Psalm 22.

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?**
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.**
- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.**
- ⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.**
- ⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.**
- ⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.**
- ⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;**
- ⁸ “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”**
- ⁹ Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts.**
- ¹⁰ On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother’s womb you have been my God.**
- ¹¹ Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.**
- ¹² Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;**
- ¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.**
- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;**
- ¹⁵ my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.**
- ¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—**
- ¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;**

**18 they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.**

19 But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!

20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!

21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

22 I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

24 For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

**25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will perform before those who fear him.**

**26 The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live forever!**

**27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.**

**28 For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.**

29 All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.

30 Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

31 they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.

Through David's experience of being hated and hunted, David foreshadows Christ. This Psalm is written during these dark days. They were quoted by Jesus in the dark hours of the cross. David's experience gives Jesus words.

In the darkest hours, we can trust our Lord. He is in control. He is bringing about the fulfillment of His promises and purposes. We may feel alone, abandoned, desolate and despairing. But we will trust the Lord. We will sing His praise. We will bow to His sovereign will.