

It's been a few weeks, really, since we had a purely narrative sermon, Tristan's wonderful reflections on biblical friendship last week was an important change of pace in a book that has seen a remarkable amount of movement. But this week we're putting our foot down on the story-line accelerator as Saul's utter obsession with David reaches new heights.

We have a lot of ground to cover, and a lot of interesting details that I wish I could delve into, but with 4 chapters, I'm just going to need to point out the landmarks as we speed on by. It was difficult picking a passage to be read, but I think what I've opted for has got all the main elements of the story represented – a skeleton if you will, so we'll dive right in and put some flesh on it.

But first some broader context to remind us of where we're coming from.

Since chapter 18 Saul becomes increasingly fearful and jealous of David, he's already got in mind that the kingdom will be taken from him, and now with this new up and coming warrior the people sing songs about how successful David compared to Saul. So, Saul is generally in a murderous mood these days. In chapter 19 Saul had sworn an oath to Jonathan that he wouldn't kill David, but it's becoming clear that Saul's conscience is as groundless as his word, because after another of David's successful battles, Saul first tries to spear him, and then pursues him in his own home. Well, this has all got a bit too much, so David goes to Jonathan and questions him. Jonathan promises to look into it, and the summary of this little reconnaissance mission is that, yep, David's a dead man unless he skips town – so he flees. That brings us to chapter 21, the first of our 4 chapters for today.

Well, the first thing David does on the run is turn up to chat to Ahimelech the priest in a town called Nob. Since the destruction of Shiloh decades before, Nob has been the centre of worship, where the high priestly family serves. David is known to Ahimelech, so David arriving isn't necessarily an unusual event, but even so Ahimelech's trembles when he sees him and interrogates David: You're alone? Where is everyone?

It might seem like an unusual response. Of course, by this time David was a captain in the army and had sought God with the help of Ahimelech several times. Presumably he had never come alone in the past, always with a servant, or some sort of escort, perhaps a party, so Ahimelech is immediately suspicious of the lone David. It could have meant any number of things, and none of them good.

David sensing Ahimelech's apprehension needs to come up with a viable story. He tries to cover his tracks as best he can and invents a plausible lie to protect himself, and presumably to protect Ahimelech as well – "The king has sent me on an urgent and secret mission, Ahimelech, you can't spill the beans to anyone."

David left so quickly and secretly that he couldn't even gather the journey's food. He and his men need supplies, so he's come to Nob to ask the priest for some food. This isn't the way things are supposed to be. The people come up to the sanctuary to make an offering to the Lord, and the food is sustenance for the priests, but here David is making a request to take food away. The only food available is the consecrated bread. BLA BLA

Well, the intrigue deepens as Saul's servant, Doeg, is also in Nob, the passage says he is "detained before the Lord", but we're none the wiser for why. He may have had to make a ritual sacrifice or oath, or maybe it was the sabbath and so he couldn't travel – another reason for Ahimelech to be suspicious of David's movements – but the takeaway here is the author is pointing out that Doeg's presence is not a surprise to God, even if it is a problem in David's plans.

The author makes this issue apparent because David's next question to Ahimelech is whether he also has a weapon. The only weapon available to David is Goliath's sword, this is a sanctuary, not a storehouse. The sword was possibly kept in Nob as a trophy of God's success, or maybe David had stashed it here for just a circumstance as this. He was after all the last one to be in possession of it. Whatever the reason, Ahimelech plays along with the idea that David has no clue that it's here. David gladly receives the sword, and that day he flees from Saul's territory. Much to our surprise, David walks into Gath, into the territory of the philistines, to speak to king Achish.

There are so many questions we could ask about this little episode alone:

1. David lies to Ahimelech, what's the deal with that?
2. Is it ok for Ahimelech to hand over sacred bread?
3. Who is Doeg and why does it matter that he's in Nob?
4. Why of all places to the philistines?

All great questions, but the thing I really want us to reflect on is David's posture toward his predicament. David has come to the person who presumably on many occasions has offered him spiritual guidance and advice. There is clearly good rapport here between the two men, and Ahimelech is well equipped to serve him in this way. But David's actions are flustered and ill considered. And look, I get it. The king intent on his murder, but what he asks of the priest in his crisis is not intercession, he wants supplies and he's using questionable means to get them.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating that when someone asks us for a meal, instead we send them away with a prayer and a pat on the back. Or if you're hungry, you can't first ask for something to eat before talking about deeper needs. If you are someone who needs help, absolutely come and let us bless you. But that's not what is going on here. David seems to be taking his survival entirely into his own hands.

And yet – as we've already noted, even as David's plans receive a spanner or two, God is not caught by surprise, and in his care for his anointed king, despite David's posture, ensures that he gets what he needs.

Sometimes it might feel like that we are entirely undeserving of God's care and provision, because we haven't gone about things in the right way, or we haven't had our mind in the right place, but that would deny two things – firstly, it denies that we are creatures, and that we are always, eternally, dependent on our creator to sustain us and give us life. This is the contract we have. God is God, and we are his creatures. Even if we think we're going it alone, and so often I feel like or act like I am going it alone, that isn't the reality. God is always providing for us. When Jesus is teaching his followers why they should love their

enemies, he says “Your Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”. We are all creatures dependent on our creator.

Secondly, it can deny that God loves his creation, and he delights to provide for us. Our heavenly Father is not a vending machine that requires the right code to get the mars bar out. He’s not mean-spirited and withholding from us, simply because we haven’t kept his laws. Does he guide us toward righteousness and discipline us, yes of course, but even Jesus speaks about how David ate the consecrated bread as an example when the pharisees complain about Jesus breaking the sabbath laws. God’s laws are for our good, not to crush us. The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. Even as we struggle with our creaturely failures, God is still a good God who delights in us and provides for us.

God cares for you, just as he cared for his anointed king.

But speaking of David, what on earth is going on with waltzing into enemy territory? This is the back end of chapter 21, and it seems David is relying on the old adage “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”. This move won’t have been a rash decision, so heavy was the threat on David’s life that he travelled 40km south-west to seek out Achish as a political refugee. Surely the Philistines would love to welcome a disaffected soldier from Israel into their ranks. But the Philistines are nervous. This is Goliath’s hometown. *That’s goliath’s sword.* “Isn’t this David?” those songs of praise that made Saul so jealous now come back to bite David as the Philistines recall the refrain: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands”. Again, David must think quickly on his feet, and begins to act like he’s lost the plot – “Of course I’m David, yes, definitely me. Haha. Want my signature? I’ll scratch it here on your gates. What’s my name again?” The scripture says he even deliberately drools into his beard to complete the picture and Achish is irritated: “Look at the man! He’s insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?”

Those that had lost their marbles in some cultures were thought of as a conduit for the gods to speak through. Like earlier in Samuel, Saul joined a group of ecstatic worshippers prophesying as the holy spirit came on him. They were harmless and considered worthy of protection, but Achish thinks he’s doing his fair share of running asylums, so David is encouraged to move on. He arrives a warrior but leaves a lunatic.

David is back on the run, and well and truly stateless. He retreats to the cave of Adullam, about 20km east of Gath. David’s brothers and parents get word of his whereabouts and come down to him, clearly things have become too dangerous for them at home, and David soon relocates them to Moab. Along with his family came a band of outcasts, distressed and indebted citizens of Israel. So, David, this decorated hero of Israel, commander of thousands resorts to being commander of 400 disaffected rag-tag rebels. The anointed future king is now considered a fugitive, with his family in exile amongst Israel’s rivals. This man of regional repute, a mighty warrior, is now considered insane and hiding in a cave. He has hit rock bottom. Or so it seems.

None of David’s plans have granted him the respite he desires. Ahimelech can’t keep him safe, Achish won’t take him, the king of Moab will take his family, but David now has these

400 men to wrangle into some sort of militia. They remain holed up in Adullam for who knows how long, and eventually the prophet Gad comes to see David with a message from the Lord: Do not dwell in the stronghold, go to the region of Judah. So, David is on the move again, but this time, for the first time since he fled, with the authorisation of the Lord's prophet.

There's one more devastating blow to come for David, when a young priest, Abiathar suddenly arrives in his camp bearing horrific news. After Saul's servant Doeg snitches that Ahimelek has aided David, in his paranoia Saul orders every priest of Nob to be put to death. His guards won't do it, and so Saul tells Doeg to do the dirty deed. He doesn't object, possibly because he's an Edomite and doesn't worship Yahweh, and he murders the 85 priests. He goes further and massacres the whole town of Nob, every man, woman, child, infant and all its livestock is put to the sword. There's a dark irony here – where Saul failed to follow the Lord's command and fulfil the ban of the Amelikites, so now he has ordered the death of the Lord's own priests and allowed his servant to fulfil the ban in Nob, leaving nothing alive. But deeper still, this is a fulfilment of the prophesy to Eli back in chapter 2, that the house of Eli will be cut short and none of his descendants will reach old age. This is the family of Eli, Ahimelek is Eli's great grandson. This evil deed by Saul is also fulfilling God's judgement. Abiathar, Ahimelek's son, was the only one to escape.

David would have been horrified at the brazen evil that is resulting from Saul's pursuit of him, and he knows that this horrible outcome was a result of his fearful and foolhardy choice to go to Nob. As chapter 22 closes, he acknowledges this to Abiathar: "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your whole family. Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too. You will be safe with me."

If David had felt in the pits in the cave of Adullam, he couldn't have imagined the depth of the mire of grief and anger he now faces in the forests of Judah. He pens a psalm in response, and you can sense his seething sarcasm in the opening line:

- <sup>1</sup> Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?  
Why do you boast all day long,  
you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?
- <sup>2</sup> You who practice deceit,  
your tongue plots destruction;  
it is like a sharpened razor.
- <sup>3</sup> You love evil rather than good,  
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.
- <sup>4</sup> You love every harmful word,  
you deceitful tongue!
- <sup>5</sup> Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:  
He will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent;  
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
- <sup>6</sup> The righteous will see and fear;  
they will laugh at you, saying,

<sup>7</sup> “Here now is the man  
who did not make God his stronghold  
but trusted in his great wealth  
and grew strong by destroying others!”

David can spare not even a shred of dignity for Doeg, the subject of this psalm, but it would be fair to see Doeg as a proxy for Saul as he expresses his feelings. If it wasn't obvious before, it's terribly obvious now: the King of Israel no longer puts his trust in the Lord or the Lord's servants, but instead enlists foreigners to annihilate God's presence in his camp. Saul no longer rules justly as the Lord's king, instead leading with cruelty and fear, entirely consumed by his self-preservation.

This horrific experience changes David's perspective, or maybe more fairly, it's at this point that the author of Samuel brings the actions of David into sharp contrast to that of Saul, and his own actions over the last few chapters. Where David has been seeking refuge amongst the enemy, making fearful decisions, holing himself up in the stronghold, God has called him out into the land, to live out the trust he has in the Lord. In contrast to God's silence with Saul, David now has words of guidance through the prophet Gad. David invites Abiathar into safety and priestly service, where Saul has cut himself off from all and every means of righteousness. And as we finally arrive to our bible reading today of chapter 23, the kingly impulse of David begins to take hold, while Saul is willing to destroy the nation if it means getting rid of David and maintaining his hold on power.

In Chapter 23 David steps up to provide aid to Keilah. For the first time reported in this narrative, he inquires of the Lord: “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?”, and the answer is yes. Now that Abiathar is with David, using the priestly ephod, he asks God directly for guidance. David's men are afraid, already feeling at risk in the forests around Judah, going down to Keilah will put them directly in harm's way. But God encourages David again, saying “Go down to Keilah, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand” and that's exactly what happens. The news reaches Saul, and he is delighted, not that Keilah has been saved, but that David has managed to place himself in a vulnerable position. In lieu of any godly advisors Saul assumes that because David is now inside a walled and gated town, God is handing David over to him! All he needs to do is place his own people under siege, destroy the city, and David is good as dead. The self-delusion is remarkable.

Well God is with David, and this time David asks God what he should do – Will Saul come down? Will the people of Keilah give him up? ‘Yes’ comes back the answer, again by Abiathar's intercession, so David and his men, now 600 strong, keep moving further west toward the Dead sea, into the hills of Ziph.

To cut a long story short, the people of Ziph do exactly what David was concerned the people of Keilah might do – the Ziphites offer to spy for Saul and work out his movements, and Saul will rip through the clans of Judah until David has no more hiding places. David is a sitting duck, but in a move that only God can orchestrate, Jonathan comes down to meet with David to encourage him, remind him that he will be king, and they make another covenant with one another. David keeps running, and just as it seems Saul is about to finally

get his hands on him, those pesky Philistines start raiding the land and Saul is called away to deal with the mischief. God is once again providentially at work.

David travels even further west to En Gedi, now in the desert on the edge of the dead sea, and he's really running out of room to move. Philistines routed, Saul returns his focus on David, this time marching 3000 young soldiers into the desert for what appears will be a final standoff. But it was not meant to be, and in fact an intimate and embarrassing one-on-one confrontation is all that's required to send Saul and his soldiers back home.

David and his men were once again hiding in a large cave, and what should happen but the very man Saul ducks into their hiding place to seek a private place to go to the loo. Quite literally caught with his pants down. David's men think this is providence, and that God meant for David to kill Saul. David carefully creeps up on Saul and cuts off the corner of his robe. But even this pricks David's conscience, and in complete contrast to Saul's murderous glee over Keilah, David rebukes his men for the suggestion, and forbids any of them to harm Saul.

Once Saul has left the cave, David calls out to him "My lord the king!" He shows Saul the proof that his life was in David's hands, but David didn't take the opportunity. He questions why Saul would seek to take his life when he is innocent of the accusations that say David is going to kill Saul. And in a statement that shows the growth that David has had across these 4 chapters, and the 5-7 year period this covers, he affirms God's sovereignty and justice saying:

"May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you."

Saul recognises David and declares in a remarkable turnaround that David is far more righteous than he is, and has sought Saul's good, rather than his death. In a moment of clarity and soul-searching, Saul declares that he knows David will be king, and he urges David to swear that he won't wipe out Saul's family, as is the local custom for dethroned monarchs. David gives him his oath, and the two men part ways.