

1 Samuel 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 21 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. Then David said to Abimelech, 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. 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.

[1 : 3 0] 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 behaviour 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? In 1 Samuel chapter 21, David is on the run from King Saul. He is driven out from Saul's court by Saul's murderous anger against him, and he must escape.

[2 : 3 1] David is driven out into the wilderness, as it were, and he is tested before he enters into his kingdom. Various of the Psalms come from this period of David's life. As in the story of Joseph, for instance, David has to learn through suffering.

The story here begins with a visit to the priests at Nob. The tabernacle is now at Nob, presumably moved there from Shiloh, perhaps after the capture of the ark at the Battle of Aphek. Much of the activity of the tabernacle continues, but the ark is no longer there.

And Ahimelech, when David comes to him, is fearful. He rightly fears that the fact that David is alone and in a hurry means that he is a fugitive from King Saul, and that he is in danger if he complies with or supports him.

David deceives him in a way that gives him plausible deniability, if he were challenged on the matter later. We should note the various forms of deception in this and surrounding narratives.

The story presents a number of these lies and deceptions in a very positive way, which raises problems for us in squaring them with the teaching of the ninth commandment, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour, which many take to be a blanket condemnation of lying.

[4 : 01] I don't believe that scripture teaches a rigorous or simplistic approach on lying. Rather, the biblical teaching on the matter is governed by communicative intent and justice.

For instance, when I tell a joke, I am telling a story as if it were true, but my intent is clearly not to deceive, and the person to whom I am telling the joke recognises that it is a joke and is not deceived.

In such a situation, I am engaging in good faith communication, even while telling something that, in the strictest manner of speaking, isn't true. One important thing to remember here is that lying is less a matter of statements considered in the abstract by themselves, but about relational aspects of communication.

Communication is also governed by considerations of justice. A narrow definition of lying may miss the sins involved, for instance, in statements that are technically true, yet designed to mislead or keep in the dark someone who has the right to the truth.

Telling the truth is not just about technically avoiding lies, but about candour and clarity. On the other hand, some people do not have the right to the truth, and to give it to them may be a sin.

[5 : 11] Indeed, we might need to lie to them in order to fulfil our duties to someone. The classic example of the SS at the door searching for the Jews in your attic can be given here. Like just war, there are occasions when justice may not merely permit the telling of lies, but even require them of us.

Such stories do challenge us to think more carefully about such matters. One of the things that it might do is highlight the importance of the phrasing of the ninth commandment, bearing false witness against your neighbour.

The aspect of being against your neighbour is an important part of it. The commandment highlights the breakdown of communicative justice and the intent to do something against someone.

As we pay more attention to the relational character of communication and the fact that communication is an action, we will be better positioned to have a more nuanced and sophisticated account of what constitutes a lie and what is telling the truth.

Saul had been handed two loaves of bread designed for God's service back in chapter 10 verse 3 and 4, and here David requests five loaves of bread. He earlier picked up five stones.

[6 : 19] Perhaps we should see some connection. Now the stones have turned to bread. Jesus refers to this story in Matthew chapter 12 verses 1 to 8. At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath.

His disciples were hungry and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. He said to them, 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?

Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless.

For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. One could perhaps legitimately argue that Ahimelech the priest recognized that the law of the showbread existed for the good of God's people, not merely as an end in itself.

And in those circumstances, the hunger of David and his men took precedence. However, there seems to be more going on here. Jesus' argument depends upon the legitimacy of overriding the law under certain circumstances.

[7 : 34] And in the case of David, this does not seem to have been merely the hunger of David and his men. Rather, it's the fact that David and his men are acting as the servants of God. And as the servants of God, on a mission of God, they have particular privileges and prerogatives.

They are like the priests who have to do the work of the Lord on the Sabbath. Even though this work involves labor that would be prohibited under other circumstances, when they are doing it for the Lord, it is not illegitimate.

By giving the bread to David and his men then, Ahimelech was recognizing that they were performing some sort of divine ministry. Lighthouse remarks upon the focus on the hand in the Hebrew of this passage.

He suggests that we might relate it to the filling of the hand or ordination. The priest gives David bread and a sword. And this is a sort of implicit ordination ceremony.

In Leviticus chapter 8 verses 25 to 28, we read of the ordination of the priest and the filling of the hand in that. Then he took the fat and the fat tail and all the fat that was on the entrails and the long lobe of the liver and the two kidneys with their fat and the right thigh and out of the basket of unleavened bread that was before the Lord, he took one unleavened loaf and one loaf of bread with oil and one wafer and placed them on the pieces of fat and on the right thigh.

[8 : 50] And he put all these in the hands of Aaron and in the hands of his sons and weighed them as a wave offering before the Lord. Then Moses took them from their hands and burned them on the altar with the burnt offering.

This was an ordination offering with a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord. The reception of bread then is a sign that the kingdom is being handed over to David. As Saul had received bread earlier on in chapter 10, David receives bread now.

David speaks of his men not merely as clean but as holy. They may be under some kind of temporary Nazarite vow so that they can enjoy priestly privileges for that period. Here we also read of Doeg the Edomite, who has a shameful role to play in the next chapter.

David has just received the sword of Goliath of Gath and then he flees to Gath, right into the den of the dragon that he had earlier slain. One could imagine that this would be the last place that Saul would expect to find him.

David's reputation has preceded him however and he is brought to Achish the king of Gath. A few chapters later he would become a vassal and mercenary for Achish. Interestingly, the Philistines of Gath misrecognise David as the king of the land.

[10 : 00] While they are misrecognising him, they may also be perceiving that whoever the official king is, David is the actual leader of the people. David successfully employs deception to save his life.

He displays his cunning and his resourcefulness. He outwits the serpent. Psalm 34 comes from this occasion and gives us some window into David's thinking at this time. A question to consider.

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