

# FIRST SAMUEL

## Chapter 21

### *David and the Holy Bread*

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 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. 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 herdsmen. 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.”

**21:1** *Nob*. A town northeast of Jerusalem and south of Gibeah where the tabernacle was relocated after the destruction of Shiloh (4:2–3; Jer 7:12). Although it appears that no attempt was made to bring the ark to this sanctuary (see note on 7:1), Ahimelech the high priest, 85 other priests (22:17–18), the ephod (v. 9) and the table of consecrated bread (v. 6) are mentioned in connection with it. (CSB)

City with priestly associations in territory of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem. David has traveled just a few miles from Ramah. (TLSB)

*Ahimelech the priest*. It appears from 22:10, 15 that David's purpose in coming to Nob was to seek the Lord's guidance by means of the Urim and Thummim. (CSB)

High priest, displaced by destruction of Shiloh. He is trembling, sensing something is amiss because the king's son-in-law is traveling alone. (TLSB)

**21:2** It is not clear why David resorts to deception in his response to Ahimelech. Perhaps it was an attempt to protect Ahimelech from the charge of involvement in David's escape from Saul. If so, his strategy was not successful (see 22:13–18). (CSB)

Would explain David's unannounced visit and provide a compelling case for secrecy. (TLSB)

**21:3** *five loaves of bread*. Modest request. (TLSB)

**21:4** *holy bread*. The “bread of the Presence” (see v. 6; Ex 25:30), which was placed in the Holy Place in the tabernacle and later in the temple as a thank offering to the Lord, symbolizing his provision of daily bread. (CSB)

To be eaten only by Aaron and his sons. Presumably the bread offered to David had been replaced by the bread of the next Sabbath. (TLSB)

*provided the men have kept themselves from women.* Although the bread was to be eaten only by the priests (see Lev 24:9), Ahimelech agreed to give it to David and his men on the condition that they were ceremonially clean (see Ex 19:15; Lev 15:18). Jesus uses this incident to illustrate the principle that the ceremonial law was not to be viewed in a legalistic manner (see Mt 12:3–4). He also teaches that it is always lawful to do good and to save life (see Lk 6:9). Such compassionate acts are within the true spirit of the law. (CSB)

Dt 23 describes how the battle camp must be holy, involving ritual cleanness. Throughout Scripture, there is peril when the unclean and the holy come into contact, apparent also in St Paul's warning about unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper (1Co 11:29).

**21:5** *as always.* In view of the directions of Dt 23, abstinence was probably practiced whenever soldiers were deployed. (TLSB)

*vessels.* Sexual organs. (TLSB)

**21:6** *replaced by hot bread.* Occurred each Sabbath, when the priests consumed the previous week's portion. Jesus cited the event as a precedent for ceremonial law giving way to human necessity (Mt 12:3–4). (TLSB)

**21:7** *detained before the LORD.* Perhaps excluded from the holy temple because he was an Edomite or was unclean, or perhaps detained by a vow or penitential duty. (TLSB)

*Edomite.* Cf Gn 25:30; Nu 20:14–21. (TLSB)

**21:8** *the king's business required haste.* Elaborates story introduced in v 2. (TLSB)

**21:9** *sword of Goliath.* Goliath's sword was kept in this sacred place as a relic of God's victory at David's hand. David had placed Goliath's armor in his tent (17:54). (TLSB)

*ephod.* Priestly garment, made of the same material as the curtain of the temple. Israel's intermediary was clothed with the materials of God's presence. (TLSB)

**21:1–9** David receives the holy bread of the Presence to sustain him during his flight from Saul. Despite David's weakness before men and his sin before God, he is sustained with this unusual blessing. When troubles and sins surround you, turn to the Lord and His servants for aid. Confess your sins and weaknesses honestly, and receive the care He administers through His servants. In mercy, the Lord will nourish, sustain, and forgive you. • Continue to nourish Your people and arm them against evil, dear Lord. Grant them wisdom with honesty. Amen. (TLSB)

*David Flees to Gath*

**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?'" 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. 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?"**

**21:10** *Gath*. One of the five major towns of the Philistines (Jos 13:3). (CSB)

One of five major cities of the Philistines; place from which Gittite giants, including Goliath, came (17:4). (TLSB)

**21:11** *king of the Gath*. The designation of David as “king” by the Philistines may be understood as a popular exaggeration expressing an awareness of the enormous success and popularity of David among the Israelite people. (CSB)

Although anointed by God’s prophet to this office, David is not yet king. Paradoxically, David was seen as the real power in the land as he sought protection from Saul. (TLSB)

**21:12** *much afraid*. Because he was recognized. David’s military victories were at the expense of the Philistines; he could hardly expect to be welcomed. (TLSB)

**21:13** *he changed his behavior*. Represents a change of plans. David may have thought of defecting to the Philistines in an alliance against Saul, but fear may have brought him to abandon the idea. (TLSB)

*made marks on the doors of the gate*. David may have been feigning some compulsive behavior by spitting or by beating on the doors. (TLSB)

**21:14** *brought him*. Presumably under restraint by guards. (TLSB)

**21:15** David’s strategy worked. Achish felt repulsed rather than threatened. David achieved escape by deception, but God achieved the deliverance of His servant through this, or even despite it. (TLSB)

**21:10–15** David pretends to be insane and so escapes the predicament at Gath. What clever, desperate measures! The author records these devices but does not commend their use in God’s name. While God would have us use our minds to accomplish worthy goals, He would also call us to trust Him and confess Him in the face of difficulty. Our trustworthy Father can deliver us, as He demonstrated through the suffering of His beloved Son. • As You have promised, gracious Lord, deliver those who call upon You in the day of trouble. Amen. (TLSB)