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*“When Fear Takes The Wheel”*

1 SAMUEL 21:10-15

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PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

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## At A Glance

David’s flight to Gath in 1 Samuel 21:10–15 shows what happens when fear takes the wheel and God’s anointed begins to act in the flesh instead of in faith. The giant-slayer who once stood boldly “in the name of the LORD” now scratches at doors with drool running down his beard—a vivid picture of how sin and self-reliance can humiliate and harm us and others. Yet even there, at David’s lowest, God’s mercy breaks in, rescuing him and inviting us to bring our own fear-driven messes to the Lord who delivers His children and restores those who call on His name.

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## When Fear Takes The Wheel

There are moments in the life of every believer when fear takes the wheel. That’s what we see in 1 Samuel 21. David—the giant-slayer, the Spirit-filled shepherd-warrior, the man after God’s own heart—finds himself running not to God, but from God’s promised land. He flees from Saul, not into the strength of the Lord, but straight into enemy territory with Goliath’s own sword hanging from his side. And when fear takes over, the anointed king of Israel begins scratching on doors and drooling down his beard, acting like a madman to save his own skin.

This passage gives us more than a strange story from David’s past; it gives us a mirror. It shows us what happens when God’s people act in the flesh instead of the Spirit. It shows how fear humiliates, deceives, and destroys. But it also shows us something even more beautiful: God’s grace pursuing His children even at their lowest, even when they have made the mess themselves.

### 1 Samuel 21:10-15

**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?”**

### Not Where He’s Supposed to Be

**Verse 10 And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath.**

That the narrator once again says **David rose and fled that day from Saul** at least suggests that David knew then and there that Doeg was going to be a problem for him. Reflecting back on this

day, David said, *“I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul...”* <sup>1</sup> *Samuel 22:21*

No divine command. No prayer. No prophet. No psalmist seeking of the Lord. This is a marked distinction in David’s life. Up to this point he’s been presented as a man who was under the Lord’s control.

I truly believe David learned an important lesson through this because after his experience with Abiathar, the only son of Ahimelech able to escape with his life; after David realized what he had done, we read: *“Therefore David inquired of the LORD, ‘Shall I go and attack these Philistines?’...”* <sup>1</sup> *Samuel 23:2*

However, in this moment, rather than remaining in the borders of Israel, David now flees into a foreign land of **Gath**. He put himself in the hands of foreigners, people who had warred with Israel from their crossing the Jordan. In stepping outside of Israel, is he not also symbolically stepping outside of God’s blessing? Afterall, Israel is the land promised to Israel and David is God’s anointed man to lead Israel. That’s where David is *supposed* to be.

David fled from one human king to another, something God warns His people against in Isaiah 31. *“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!”* *Isaiah 31:1* Here’s an important principle: God’s people rely supremely upon God, no one else. We have no other deliverer.

### Has He Still Come In The Name Of The Lord

**Verse 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?’”**

Evidently David was relying on anonymity in his seeking refuge in Gath. Ironically, he carried the sword of the champion of Gath *into Gath*. He literally cut off the head of the Philistine from Gath with his own sword and now he’s walking around with it in the Philistine’s hometown. Who does this? That’s the thing about acting in the flesh. You do stupid things.

The last time David faced the Philistines, he said to the giant, *“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.”* <sup>1</sup> *Samuel 17:45*

The question is could he say the same thing now? This time David has Goliath’s sword, but has he come in the name of the Lord?! It didn’t take long before David’s plan was foiled.

The servant of Achish recited the song, **Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands’**. This song comes from David’s conquest of the Philistines – these very people of Gath. (cf. 17:50-54, 18:6-7) What did David expect to happen? What did happen is what we’d expect to happen – David was recognized and taken into custody. (**in their hands**. v. 13)

### The Drool Of Madness

**Verses 12-13 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.**

Realizing that his identity had been compromised, he **was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath**. David must have been on Gath’s most wanted list! Vengeance is sweet to a human king. He could make a spectacle of David, the man who killed their best warrior and ravaged their land.

Having gotten himself into this situation, he figured he'd better get himself out. He **pretended to be insane** and **made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard**. This is the future king of Israel. Where's his dignity? Where's the wisdom and strength and leadership? David, a man filled with the Spirit of the Lord was walking in the flesh.

What a warning. You should be very concerned about where your flesh will lead you. You think you're in control and you're on top of your game one moment – oh the irony - '**David [has killed] his ten thousands**' – the next you're acting like you've lost your mind with drool running down your beard.

Oil running down the beard was a symbol of anointing in the Old Testament. When Moses anointed Aaron, he poured oil on Aaron's head and it ran down his beard to his robe. Psalm 133 speaks of brotherly unity as a blessing, akin to oil running down the beard. It was refreshing, it was beautiful, it was divine.

It was symbolic of the Holy Spirit's filling of a person. How ironic that the anointed one, the one with whom was the Spirit of the Lord, found himself not with oil running down his beard, but drool, a symbol of shame in the Old Testament (cf. Numbers 12:14, Deuteronomy 25:9, Job 17:6)

It was not the oil of gladness, but the drool of madness. Oh be careful, beloved! Your flesh will humiliate you.

### God's Intervention At David's Lowest

**Verses 14-15 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?"**

Apparently, David was among them long enough to put on a convincing show. But this also speaks to God's protective hand on David's life, even outside of Israel, even in the hands of foreigners, even acting in the flesh. Once again, the irony is thick. David clearly has God's protection. Yet he once again took matters into his own hands and played the fool. This time, quite literally!

This is now the second episode of David's life in which he fails to seek the Lord and takes matters into his own hands. As we saw last week, this has consequences. In the next chapter, 1 Samuel 22, we're going to see those consequences. He accepts responsibility for the slaughter of the citizens of Nob, stating, "I have occasioned the death..." 1 Samuel 22:21

But this will not be the last time he does this. Nor will it be the last time he finds himself in the service of Achish. He'll return in chapter 27, which begins an ambiguous moral season of his life, filled with raids and more deception. This in turn results in his own city being burned to the ground, all the soldiers' wives and children taken captive, including David's. David was nearly stoned by his own men over it!

David is not the only man named in the Hebrews hall of faith who deceived a Philistine king, putting his own wife at risk, and subsequently the fate of the entire nation of Israel through whom our Messiah came!

In Genesis 20:2, Abraham lied to Abimelech, a Philistine king. To protect his own life, he introduced Sarah as his sister and the king took her into his own quarters. This put Sarah in grave danger. Furthermore, imagine what would come of the promise to Abraham that his offspring would be a blessing to the nations! Think about Messiah who came through the lineage of Abraham and Sarah. Thankfully, the Lord intervened for Abraham just as He did for David and in the very next chapter Isaac is born. But look at the precarious spot both Abraham and David put themselves and others in.

What is quickly becoming evident in David's life is this pattern: Flesh-driven decisions create collateral damage while Spirit-driven decisions bring deliverance. The message of David's life could not be more clear: do it your way and someone is going to pay.

### Application:

#### When you act in the flesh, you can expect disaster.

I recognize we're conducting somewhat of an autopsy on David's life with 20/20 hindsight. I also wonder what I'd do if I were in his shoes. I hope and pray I would walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh. That's the expectation for every believer. We're told to walk in the Spirit and promised that if we do, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (cf. Galatians 5:16)

However, we, like David, are prone to act in the flesh and this story is here to show us how acting in the flesh cost David. It's a warning for us. The flesh wants to destroy you, humiliate you, kill you. *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."* James 1:14-15

If you learn anything from the Life of David, learn that whenever you take matters into your own hands, when you let fear drive you, when you act in the flesh, you're headed for disaster. Oh, the Lord may intervene in your life, like he did this time for David. But make no mistake, David paid dearly for his fleshly decisions, as did other people. You're right to be afraid when you act in the flesh.

#### If you want to live without fear, walk by the Spirit.

Do you want to live without fear? Walk in the council of the Lord. Let the Spirit lead you every day, all day. I found it interesting that there's a new reaction from David in this passage – fear. The shepherd-warrior was **much afraid**.

Even as a young boy, David wasn't afraid when he killed both lions and bears to defend his sheep. The young man who valiantly stood on the battlefield with nothing but a sling and a stone and the God of angel armies, wasn't afraid. He credited both his victories over lions and bears and his certain victory over Goliath to God Himself. He faced wild animals, Goliath, the Philistine army, Saul's spear – twice, and more combat, all without having fear.

Now, we read, David is **much afraid**. What does this response reveal to us about David's situation? Why is David afraid? So far, he's the picture of courage, of wisdom, and of strength. Why? Because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. But now, having not sought the Lord, David is afraid. Do you see the connection?

We fear when we know we've done wrong. We fear when we know we've gotten ourselves into a situation we shouldn't be in. We fear when we know we've taken matters into our own hands and we've failed to trust in God. We've forced a situation. We've allowed temptation to get the best of us. We've deceived others. We know what we ought to do but we scheme to do anything but that. Fear is inevitable.

And preverbally we wake up one day with drool running down our beard and we wonder how our life got to be the way it is. We got into a mess, and we imagine that we're going to have to get ourselves out of it. But that only compounds the problem.

### CHRIST CONNECTION

Here's the beautiful picture to this story, this is what makes this story so glorious – God was ready to rescue David even at his lowest. David was far from perfect. Here he is acting like he lost his mind with drool on his beard. He's at his lowest point in his life. And the Lord intervened.

The Lord caused Achish to believe David was insane. What a stupid plan, yet the Lord made it work for David. Over and over, the author of Samuel wants us to recognize God as the hero working in the background of David's life. Likely so we would see that He's at work in ours, too.

David's life is a testimony of God's amazing grace – offered to any and all who will receive it by faith. Despite David's failures, God was ready to respond to David's cries for help. What we don't read in the narrative, we do read in the psalm David wrote after his escape from Gath, *"I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears."* Psalm 34:4

Isn't this what the entire Old Testament reveals? Isn't this what Jesus affirmed time and again? Isn't this the heart of the parable of the pharisee and tax collector? The tax collector in the story stood far from the altar and couldn't lift his eyes to God. All he could say was, *"Lord, have mercy on me [the] sinner."* Luke 18:13 It was he, Jesus said, not the self-righteous pharisee, who went home right with God.

We're told that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord with a contrite heart, asking Him for mercy, for forgiveness of sin, believing that Christ died for them, will be saved! And God is not only ready to hear the contrite cries of the unbeliever. Peter tells us to *"[cast] all your anxieties upon the Lord, for He cares for you."* 1 Peter 5:7

"Perfect love casts out all fear," John says, "for fear has to do with punishment." (cf. 1 John 4:18) Jesus took your punishment upon Himself and credits you with His righteousness. That has impact not only on the life to come, but on life here now!

It means you, as a beloved child of God, can rest assured that your heavenly Father is for you, cares about you, knows your needs, knows the solution to your problems better than you do, and is willing to work on your behalf. You don't have to take matters into your own hands and "figure it out." You're invited to take matters to the feet of Jesus and lay them down.