
“When Leadership Goes Wrong”

1 SAMUEL 21:1-9

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At A Glance

This passage shows David at one of his lowest moments—God’s anointed king leaning on fear and deception instead of trusting the Lord. It set in motion consequences that would devastate an entire city. What seemed like a harmless lie for a loaf of bread opened the door for Doeg, reminding us that when leaders stop trusting God and start trusting themselves, innocent people often pay the price. Yet even David’s failure points us to a greater King—Jesus—who never walked by fear or deceit, and who bore our consequences on the cross so that we might walk in integrity and trust.

A Sobering Leadership Lesson

Every leader has moments they wish they could take back — moments where fear eclipsed faith, where pressure pushed them into shortcuts, where the need to *act* outweighed the call to *trust*. And if you’ve led anything for any length of time — a business, a ministry, a family — you know how quickly a single decision can ripple outward into the lives of people who never made it, never approved it, and never saw it coming.

Today’s passage gives us one of the most sobering leadership moments in the life of David. This is not David and Goliath. This is not David the worshiper, or David the shepherd-warrior, or David the man after God’s own heart. This is David — God’s anointed king — hungry, frightened, and leaning on his own understanding rather than on the God who called him.

And Scripture lets the tension sit. No lightning bolt. No thunder. No immediate judgment. But tucked into the scene — like a shadow in the doorway — is a single man watching. Doeg the Edomite. And with him, the seeds of catastrophe.

David’s journal entry about this day became Psalm 34 and Psalm 52 — songs I can only imagine were written through tears of grief and guilt. And the lesson he learned the hard way is the lesson every leader must learn: when God’s anointed stops trusting God and starts relying on self, people get hurt. Influence is a gift that carries weight. When leaders choose deception instead of dependence, others will eventually pay the price.

This text isn’t here to shame David. It’s here to sober us — and ultimately to point us to a King far greater than David, a King who never lied, never manipulated, never walked by fear, and yet bore the consequences of our sins instead of causing others to bear His.

1 Samuel 21:2-4

²And 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. ³Now 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.”

Something’s Wrong

Verse 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?”

As one of Saul’s closest warriors and a commander of thousands, David shouldn’t be travelling alone. A brigade commander doesn’t go anywhere without an entourage. That itself is suspicious. Ahimelech feels it immediately: **Why are you alone**, David? Something’s off. Something’s wrong.

Verse 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.

Instead of confessing the danger he’s in as he had done with Samuel (19:18) and seeking the Lord’s will through the priest of the Lord, David lied. He bent the truth — not to protect innocent life like Jonathan or Michal had done — but to protect himself.

One thing we need to remember as we read and apply scripture is to let scripture interpret scripture. The fact is, if we keep reading into chapter 22, we find a consequence for David’s lie here. We’ll unpack that in a moment when we come to verse 7. Here’s my point, scripture does not always lay out the moral implications or the judgment of God on a matter in black and white. Like all good moral stories, the reader is sometimes left in suspense to ponder the ethical considerations. It is only later in the story that it becomes clear.

A Harmless Loaf

Verses 3-4 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.”

Levitical Law (cf. Leviticus 24) required a dozen loaves of bread be placed in the tabernacle on a golden tray, to be replaced each sabbath with fresh bread. This bread was only to be eaten by priests, and they in a holy place. He lied to the priest and tricked him into giving him bread he shouldn’t have eaten.

Verse 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?”

Once again David stretched the truth, inferring that he and his men were on a special expedition. The author is inviting us to consider David’s life deeply here. On the one hand we know he is God’s anointed. He’s Saul’s “better neighbor” to whom the kingdom of Israel was transferred.

Yet, David is pushing the ethical boundaries to meet his own needs. He’s taking matters into his own hands, something we’ve often criticized Saul for doing. Something the Lord judged him for. Yet David was not judged for this. At least not like Saul. David did not lose his kingdom. This is where the reader has to wrestle with “why not?” We’ll return to this question later.

Verse 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.

The priest took David at his word and gave him bread. But what we read next makes this somewhat of a cautionary tale.

Doeg the Destroyer

The story takes a sinister turn in **verse 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.**

Doeg was a foreigner who had apparently been brought into service to Saul, **the chief of Saul's herdsmen.** He was either conscripted by conquest, or perhaps he had converted. The latter might explain why he was **detained before the Lord.** Perhaps he was undergoing some ritual process to fulfill a vow or something to that effect. It's not clear why Doeg was there. The point is he was. The literary camera shifts from David and Ahimelech to Doeg off in the distance, maybe peering through the window or leering in a doorway.

Since we will not reach this point in the story until the new year, I want to go ahead and present the rest of the story now. In chapter 22 Saul is having a fit because no one is telling him where David was hiding. Doeg the Edomite, stands up and says I saw him in Nob with Ahimelech.

Enraged, Saul summoned Ahimelech the priest. He and all the priests came to Saul and ultimately Doeg put eighty five to death. Imagine this, the King of Israel allowed a foreigner to slaughter the priests of God. Saul refused to put all of the Amalekites to death as God commanded him, but he was more than willing to slaughter God's priests! Saul is a wretched, wicked man. Absolutely unhinged. And Doeg was an all too eager executioner.

David's Introspection & Confession

David reflected upon Saul and Doeg's grievous sin in Psalm 52, *"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? . . . You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth."* Psalm 52:1, 3

Destruction is promised for the Doegs of the world: *"Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin. . . he will uproot you from the land of the living"* Psalm 52:5 Sin has consequences.

One of Ahimelech's sons escaped and came to David and told him what Doeg had done. David's response in 22:21 helps us understand what took place in today's passage. David's response:

"And David said to Abiathar, 'I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house.'" 1 Samuel 22:21

Let me ask you, do you think the Lord approved of David's deception to Ahimelech? This doesn't discount Doeg's culpability for what he did. Nor Saul's. Sin has consequences. But the future king of Israel experienced the reality that sometimes, other people bear the consequences for the sins of the leader. David lied and eighty-five priests plus every man, woman, child and infant, every ox, donkey, and sheep of the city of Nob died.

Doubling Down

Let's return now to the present story in chapter 20, **verse 8-9. 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." 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."**

Once again David doubles down on his deception, this time adding **the king's business required haste**. He takes holy bread he was never meant to eat, and he walks away with the sword of Goliath, the very weapon that had symbolized God's deliverance. The irony is thick! What was he going to do with Goliath's sword?!

He's got a weapon in his hand to fight who? Saul's army?! As we'll see next week David escapes to the king of Gath, then pretends to be insane, drooling down his beard. Then finally he becomes the leader of a group of 400 misfits wandering in the desert.

David's actions this day had serious consequences for hundreds of people. If this isn't a leadership lesson, I don't know what is. When God's man takes matters into his own hands, finds his own solutions, bends the rules, and worse, deceives others for his own ends, real people suffer. People died because of David.

Now again, you can argue it was Doeg's sin. Yes, it was. He was an awful man. It was Saul's sin. Yes. They were immediately responsible for the atrocities that day. But it began with David and he knew it. It did not begin with David's deception, though. I believe David was wrong for lying to Ahimelech. But I believe he was wrong for something that happened even before that; something deeper.

I believe the culpability David felt in his heart, and expressed in his Psalm 34, was that he failed to trust the Lord for provision and protection. David took matters into his own hands and lied to get food and sword. In doing so, he exposed Ahimelech and the people of Nob to retribution.

Humility or Hypocrisy?

I'm not just speculating. Let's go to Psalm 34. This psalm was written immediately after Doeg slaughtered the priests of Nob. I believe it's David reflecting back on this episode in his life:

"The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." Psalm 34:10. David went to Ahimelech because he was hungry. He's either reflecting in humility or he's a hypocrite.

"Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit." Psalm 34:13 What did David do when he got there? He lied.

I believe David reflected back on this episode and realized he was to blame, both his lack of trust in the Lord's provision and his deception. Had he been honest with Ahimelech, at least the priest would have had his own decision to make – to aid or not. But more importantly, had he trusted the Lord for bread and safety, he never would have gone in the first place. Ahimelech, the eighty-five priests, and the entire town of Nob would have been spared the sword of Doeg.

This begs the question, what should David have done?

David should have trusted the Lord for provision and protection

David should have trusted the Lord's provision instead of manipulating circumstances through deceit. The same God who delivered him from Goliath could certainly feed him and protect him from Saul. In the words of his future son, *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* Proverbs 3:5-6

David should have trusted the Lord with the consequences

Rather than leaning on his own understanding, David should have been honest with Ahimelech, trusting that the Lord would work out the details. Even if that honesty brought hardship, it would have been better to suffer for righteousness than to sin for self-preservation.

True leadership requires not cleverness, but confidence in God's character. When God's people walk in integrity, He bears the consequences. When we walk in deceit, others often bear them instead.

David ultimately trusted the Lord for his own salvation

Let's return to that question I asked earlier, why did God not take the kingdom from David over this when he did from Saul for much less? I think the answer is that Saul was a presumptuous man who occasionally did what was right. David, on the other hand, was a faithful man who occasionally did what was wrong.

Is this not true of all humanity? Will not those who believe the gospel inherit the Kingdom of God despite their sin? And will not those who harden their hearts toward God, who presume upon God, inherit His wrath despite their good deeds?

Saul is every lost person who thinks that by doing some good things they will be ok with God. This is the height of presumption; something God told Saul through Samuel was the same as witchcraft. There are no "innocent" people. Only those who reject the gospel, deny God, and think they can be counted worthy of His eternal kingdom by offering some penance of good deeds and those who trust in Him for salvation.

David, on the other hand, is every faithful person who falls in sin. He's you. He's me. Praise God for David! Praise God for David's story here. The truth is, you and I have deceived others. We've either told outright lies or we've twisted and stretched the truth to yield more favorable results. Yet, because of the new covenant in Christ's blood, there is now no condemnation for us. Now go and sin no more!

Christ Connection

And this brings us to Christ. Every leader in Scripture — even God's anointed ones — has moments where fear eclipses faith and where others suffer for their failures. But not Jesus. He is our true King, the only perfect King, the only King who never took matters into His own hands, never manipulated a moment, never leaned on self-reliance for protection or provision. He is the one King whose every action we can trust without hesitation, because He always did the Father's will, and the Father publicly affirmed His perfect obedience by raising Him from the dead on the third day.

And now this flawless King — who never caused others to bear the consequences of His sin, but instead bore the consequences of *our* sin on the cross — credits His righteousness to all who believe. He invites us to walk the path David should have walked that day in Nob: not the path of fearful self-preservation, but the path of faith-filled dependence. In His words, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" Matt. 6:33