

Doing Wrong in the Name of Right

Church history has a number of cases of men whose faith failed and then recovered. One of them was Thomas Cranmer who lived in the 1500s. He lived in the time when England broke away from Rome and became Protestant. He guided much of the church to a more evangelical faith. But in the politics of the time, England shifted from Protestant to Catholic and back again, depending on who was on the throne. At first Cranmer stood for the Protestant faith, but then when Mary I, a Catholic queen was on the throne, she put two of his friends, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley to death in front of him, and he recanted, claiming to submit to Catholicism. His faith had failed.

But on the day when he was supposed to explain why he was now a Catholic, in the pulpit of University Church, Oxford, Cranmer shocked everyone by recanting of his previous recanting. He denied papal authority, and knowing that he would be burnt at the stake, he declared that he wanted his hand burnt first, for it was the thing that had originally signed his recanting of Protestantism. He was pulled out of the pulpit, dragged to the stake where his two friends had died. Fulfilling his words, he stuck his hand in the fire first, crying out as he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Cranmer did right, then did wrong for supposed right reasons, and then returned to what was right.

One of the signs of spiritual decline is when we can find all kinds of right motives to explain wrong actions. When our faith weakens, we begin to give in to pragmatic reasons for disobeying God. Faith gives way to fear. Principle gives way to pragmatism. Trust in God turns to tricks and techniques.

Whether it is honesty in the workplace, owning Christ in front of your friends, not giving in to peer pressure, proclaiming the gospel in a world becoming hostile to it, we are always being tested for whether we are walking by faith or by sight.

When our trust fades, and our sin grows, and we justify it, it is a sign of spiritual decline.

David was in just such a place in 1 Samuel 21. Having gone from seven years of being the national hero, and the king's armour-bearer, and the general of the army, David has become Saul's number 1 enemy, and an outlaw in all of Israel. Saul wants him dead, and since Saul is the absolute monarch, it means that every citizen of Israel should also want David dead.

Chapter 21 begins a 7-year period of David's being hunted by Saul.

To understand something of this chapter, understand that David was in a place of desperation.

David had a position and he'd lost it. He had a wife and he lost her. He had a wise counselor in Samuel, and he lost him. He had a friend in Jonathan, and he lost him.

He has no home, no base, and no real support. He lacks every resource that he would need to escape the king who is determined to kill him—food, money, weapons, comrades. He can't even go home to Bethlehem, for there will be spies and assassins waiting for him.

So often, it is when every crutch or support that we've been leaning on is removed, that we begin to see what we truly love, or fear, or depend upon. When comfort, and familiarity, and popularity, and family, and friends, and money and convenience are all taken away, what then? What comes out of our heart?

Those are powerful moments when we find out if we live by faith or by sight, whether we truly live

under the authority of Christ, or under our own pragmatic authority.

What came out of David's heart showed him and others that he was not yet ready to be king. In the seven good years in Saul's palace, David has shown humility, wisdom, and integrity. But now under the trial of attack, and injustice and fear, David's deeper flaws are shown. When all the supports are removed from David's life, he is willing to lie and deceive to save his own skin.

So in this chapter we will see two instances of David walking in the flesh. Sandwiched in between them we will see an example of faith, in this case the faith of the priest Ahimelech, providing a contrast to David's failure.

I. David's Fleshly Response: Lying Self-Protectiveness

1 Samuel 21:1 Now David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech was afraid when he met David, and said to him, "Why *are* you alone, and no one is with you?"

2 So David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has ordered me on some business, and said to me, 'Do not let anyone know anything about the business on which I send you, or what I have commanded you.' And I have directed *my* young men to such and such a place. (1 Sam. 21:1-2)

Gibeah was where David and Jonathan said their goodbyes, and the city of Nob is less than 5km from Gibeah. Apparently, this is where the Tabernacle resided at this time, even though the Ark was still in Kirjath Jearim (1 Sam. 7:2) a few miles to the west. In his near-40 years as king, Saul never sought to re-unite the Ark with the Tabernacle. So this is a small city where the priests lived with their families, including the high priest Ahimelech, and his son Abiathar, who were possibly overlapping in their service, because Jesus refers to this time as the time of Abiathar the priest.

When Ahimelech sees David, he is afraid. He knows David is a prominent commander in the army. Everyone knows David, who slew the giant Goliath. A prominent commander in the army would not typically be travelling alone, without his retinue. Ahimelech may well have known of the bad blood between Saul and David. He possibly suspects that David may be a fugitive and fears the king's retribution. And as we'll find out, he was quite right to fear that retribution, because this incident cost him his life.

So he asks David why he is alone. And here, David's faith fails him, and he leans on the arm of the flesh. The same man who faced a giant now trembles at an embarrassing question, and lies. He claims that Saul has sent him on a secret mission, and that's why no one else knows, and why he is alone. He has sent his men off to a rendezvous point. Possibly David did have some men with him and sent them to meet him at the cave of Adullam (22:2). But here he is alone, and lying about his relationship with Saul and his reason for being there.

A few verses later, David is going to tell another lie.

8 And David said to Ahimelech, "Is there not here on hand a spear or a sword? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste."

9 So the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, there it is, wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take *it*. For *there is* no other except that one here." And David said, "*There is* none like it; give it to me." (1 Sam. 21:8-9)

David claims that the reason he is without his weapons is that this was a sudden and secret mission. Well, there is one sword around the Tabernacle: a memento from the battle with Goliath. This sword is very likely much too large for David, although David is no doubt quite a bit larger than he was seven years earlier when he fought Goliath. David takes it, again having deceived the priest as

to why he needs the sword.

Was David sinning when he told these lies? Without a doubt. He broke a clear commandment: you shall not bear false witness. But, says the pragmatist, he was in danger! What if he had told the truth? Wouldn't the priest have told Saul? Wouldn't he have been arrested on the spot? Or would the priest have helped him nonetheless, with God's blessing?

Well, we don't know. The fact is, when you sin because you fear the consequences of obeying God, you never get to find out what would have happened had you obeyed. You miss out on that possible deliverance, that intervention of God, that vindication of His name. You might temporarily avoid some suffering, but you are avoiding the righteous suffering God appointed for you, to try you and purge you, and now you must go on to face the suffering of sin's consequences. Sin's consequences are always worse and more painful than the suffering of obedience.

In fact, the consequences of this deception are beginning right here.

7 Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD. And his name was Doeg, an Edomite, the chief of the herdsmen who *belonged* to Saul. (1 Sam. 21:7)

Standing there is a foreigner, probably a mercenary hired by Saul. He is at the Temple for unknown reasons, possibly for a ritual associated with converting, possibly for some other reason. At any rate, later on Doeg informs on David.

8 "All of you have conspired against me, and *there is* no one who reveals to me that my son has made a covenant with the son of Jesse; and *there is* not one of you who is sorry for me or reveals to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as *it is* this day."

9 Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who was set over the servants of Saul, and said, "I saw the son of Jesse going to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub.

10 "And he inquired of the LORD for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine." (1 Sam. 22:8-10)

18 And the king said to Doeg, "You turn and kill the priests!" So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck the priests, and killed on that day eighty-five men who wore a linen ephod.

19 Also Nob, the city of the priests, he struck with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and nursing infants, oxen and donkeys and sheep-- with the edge of the sword. (1 Sam. 22:18-19)

Because of David's deception, these priests ended up murdered.

Would telling the truth have saved those lives? Maybe. Perhaps Ahimelech would have sent David away. Perhaps David would have caught and stopped Doeg. We don't know. We only have history as it turns out, and in this case, David sinned to supposedly save life (his own), but ultimately at the cost of many others.

It is never right to do wrong in the name of right, taking our eyes off God's Word, trusting only in our pragmatic instincts. That's not what the King of God's kingdom should do.

One day, the greater Son of David will also be faced with a question. Standing in the Garden of Gethsemane, men armed with clubs and swords will say, "Who among you is Jesus of Nazareth?" No pragmatism, no lies, no deception. He simply announces, "I am he. If you're seeking Me, you have Me, let these disciples go their way." Instead of being self-protective and fleshly, Jesus is sacrificial and faithful, trusting in his Father's will, and still seeking the good of others.

Faith doesn't need to know the outcome, it just needs to know who is controlling and in charge of the outcome. That's what the Author and Finisher of our faith did.

But in the middle of this chapter is a contrast with David's deception.

II. Ahimelech' Walk of Faith: Loving Protectiveness

3 "Now therefore, what have you on hand? Give *me* five *loaves* of bread in my hand, or whatever can be found." 4 And the priest answered David and said, "*There is* no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread, if the young men have at least kept themselves from women." 5 Then David answered the priest, and said to him, "Truly, women *have been* kept from us about three days since I came out. And the vessels of the young men are holy, and *the bread is* in effect common, even though it was sanctified in the vessel this day." 6 So the priest gave him holy *bread*; for there was no bread there but the showbread which had been taken from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* on the day when it was taken away. (1 Sam. 21:3-6)

David is truly a fugitive with the clothes on his back. He can't go to his home town. Everywhere he goes will be watched. He needs food, and some means to hunt and defend himself. So he asks for whatever food can be spared. It's a sign of how little Saul cared about religion in Israel that the city where the Tabernacle resided didn't seem to have any more food than the shewbread in the Tabernacle. This was a poor city with poor people.

The only bread was the special bread of the presence. You might remember, these were the twelve loaves of bread that were laid out on the Table of Shewbread every Sabbath, and left there for one week. They could then be taken off, replaced, and the priests were allowed to eat them. Now no one was supposed to eat these except the priests.

However, the priest is here quite rightly placing the importance of life and limb over a ceremonial regulation. He simply asks if David and his absent men are ritually pure. That is, if they have abstained from physical relations with their wives, or it has been at least 24 hours since being made unclean, then they can partake. The word *vessels* can mean gear, or clothes, or bodies, and verse 5 likely means "The young men's bodies are consecrated even on an ordinary mission, so of course their bodies are consecrated today." (1 Sam. 21:5)

So the priest gives David the shewbread to eat. Now isn't this another example of breaking God's commands for pragmatic reasons? Well, no, at least not on the part of the Ahimelech. Jesus referred to this incident to explain an important principle.

Matthew 12:1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

2 And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" 3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 4 "how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? (Matt. 12:1-4)

Jesus taught that the higher law of love or charity could rightly overrule a ceremonial ordinance. If life and limb was at stake, (and since Ahimelech believed that David was on royal errand) it would not have been right to refuse David the necessary sustenance. God's moral laws always take precedence over lesser principles or regulations. Jesus Himself deliberately violated the Sabbath on a number of occasions to point out the difference. Loving a man with a withered hand or a paralysed body took precedence over keeping the ceremonial requirement of not carrying a bed on the Sabbath, or a doctor not practising the work of healing.

It's important to understand the difference between David's lying, and the priest's breaking of the law. There are no situations when moral laws can be broken without sin. It is always sin to lie, steal, cheat, hate, lust.

But there were situations when the ceremonial and civil laws could be suspended in a situation. The sabbath law (the fourth commandment) was a ceremonial law, and God himself gave many examples of when it can be broken right in the law of Moses. (priests in temple for example). Here Ahimelech needed to suspend a ceremonial law for the sake of a higher good.

Moral laws never change and have always existed. Ceremonial laws change and have a beginning and ending point.

David and the priest broke the ceremonial law, but it was right, because a higher law was at stake: the law of love and charity. The Law of the Greater Good is not pragmatic or selfish or self-protective. The Law of the Greater Good says that if something commanded by God: such as help the needy, preserve life, is jeopardised if we merely kept observing the ceremonial law, we must obey the greater good.

Ahimelech showed great faith and love in being willing to share consecrated bread for the sake of feeding a starving, desperate man. If Ahimelech had been driven by the legalism of the Pharisees, he could never have suspended the ceremonial law for the sake of the moral. But he was not guided by a selfish legalism, or a self-protectiveness over his position. Indeed, he would pay for it with his life. He did what was right, even though many legalists would have called it wrong. He did what was right, even though he would come to suffer for it.

III. David's Walk of the Flesh: Cowardly Self-Protectiveness

10 Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath. 11 And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying: 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands'?"

12 Now David took these words to heart, and was very much afraid of Achish the king of Gath.

13 So he changed his behavior before them, feigned madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard.

David sets forth from Nob provisioned and armed. Since David is now an outlaw in Israel, he basically seeks what we would call political asylum; he wants refugee status amongst the people he has spent so much time destroying: the Philistines. It's hard to know what David was thinking. Perhaps he thought he could enter the city of Gath unrecognised and quietly blend in, just an anonymous Hebrew fugitive. Of course, one hopes he had the sense to hide the sword of Goliath before doing so.

On the other hand, maybe David thought that someone defecting from the hosts of Saul would be hailed as a notable triumph, and that he would find a welcome in seeking its protection. David is once again, leaning on the arm of the flesh. He is doing what the Israelites in Scripture so often do: return to Egypt, seek alliances with God's enemies, hoping for the best, while relying on the flesh instead of God.

But it quickly blows up in his face. The Philistines quickly recognise David. They can even quote the song that the Israelite women would sing. Worse, they even call him the king of the land. He is so prominent on the battlefield that he is basically the king in their eyes. Perhaps they recognised the rivalry between him and Saul; maybe word had even reached them that David had been secretly anointed. When David hears this, he is terribly afraid. His scheme has not worked. These people are not friendly towards him. They have their prize catch, and he has swum voluntarily into their net.

And now, far from being safe from Saul, David is in even greater danger than before. He is surrounded by people who see him as their worst enemy. In fact, if you look at the title of Psalm 56, you can see that he was likely arrested and brought before the king to be imprisoned or even executed.

Psalm 56:1 <To the Chief Musician. Set to "The Silent Dove in Distant Lands." A Michtam of David when the Philistines captured him in Gath.> (Ps. 56:1)

Now David is in real trouble. He can't fight his way out of a whole city of Philistines. He may not even have the sword with him. He is now being led to almost certain death in front of Achish. So what does David do? David really sinks to rock bottom.

He does his best mad-man impression: drooling, babbling, carving graffiti on the gates. David obviously wasn't doing this when he first entered Gath, or they probably would have kicked him out. He waits until he is brought into the king's presence. Here is the same David who faced Goliath, reduced to the level of pretending he is insane and messing all over himself.

The writer has this in the Bible because we are meant to say: see what even the best are reduced to when they take their eyes off God and trust in the arm of the flesh.

And now the writer adds a great moment of humour:

14 Then Achish said to his servants, "Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me?
15 "Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this *fellow* to play the madman in my presence? Shall this *fellow* come into my house?" (1 Sam. 21:14-15)

In other words, "why do you bring this side-show into my throne room? Haven't I got enough madmen working for me already? I'm surrounded by lunatics! I don't need another one."

In the ancient near East, people tended to see madness as being possessed by a spirit, and wouldn't harm you, for fear of being harmed by that spirit. David is released, and flees to a cave.

Think of another time, when David's descendant was also in a court, surrounded by enemies looking to incriminate Him. Finally, the High Priest put Him under oath, and said, "Are You the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" 62 Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mk. 14:61-62)

That answer led to an immediate pronouncement of "Guilty" of blasphemy and Jesus was led off to Pilate, where they tried to find a Roman law He had broken to have Him put to death by Rome. Jesus did not shrink back from this, but took the cup of the Cross and drank it. As Philippians 2 tells us, He became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross. Jesus is the final king, because where other kings failed, Jesus succeeded.

David, for all that made him Israel's greatest king, was still very much a work in progress at this point, and a contrast to Israel's final and ultimate king, Yeshua.

But if today, you are in Christ, then you have the position in Him, and the resources in Him to live by faith, and not by sight. So if you claim that, then you should evaluate whether your life and your decisions are more like David's, in his hour of desperation, or more like Jesus', in His hour. When there is a difficult decision to be made: a relationship that could end, a major deal that could be lost, a job that could be lost, do you turn to the arm of the flesh, and trust what your own eyes and self-protectiveness tell you? Or do you trust in God's authority, obeying what He says, following His

laws, His ethics, His commands, even when it seems it will land you in hot water, or not get you what you want, or bring more trouble, or expose you to harm?

Those moments are not accidents. They are placed there by God to test if our faith is real or just a Sunday slogan. They test if our belief is just a hobby on a Sunday, or the code we live by in all of life. They test if we believe God is present everywhere, beholding the evil and the good, and will bring everything we do to account. Are you truly under authority, or guided by your own wits?

Those who are not in Christ do wrong for supposed right reasons. They justify all they do.

Those in Christ do right, even when the world thinks it wrong, even when it doesn't make sense, even when it looks like it will go wrong when they do right. Why? Because they are under authority, under the gracious authority of Christ, living in the law of love.