

CHAPTER 21

David has now quite taken leave both of Saul's court and of his camp, has bidden farewell to his alter idem — his other self, the beloved Jonathan; and henceforward to the end of this book he is looked upon and treated as an outlaw and proclaimed a traitor. We still find him shifting from place to place for his own safety, and Saul pursuing him. His troubles are very particularly related in this and the following chapters, not only to be a key to the Psalms, but that he might be, as other prophets, an example to the saints in all ages, “of suffering affliction, and of patience,” and especially that he might be a type of Christ, who, being anointed to the kingdom, humbled himself, and was therefore highly exalted. But the example of the suffering Jesus was a copy without a blot, that of David was not so; witness the records of this chapter, where we find David in his flight,

- I.** Imposing upon Abimelech the priest, to get from him both victuals and arms (v. 1-9).
- II.** Imposing upon Achish, king of Gath, by feigning himself mad (v. 10-15). Justly are troubles called temptations, for many are by them drawn into sin.

<B20>1 SAMUEL 21:1-9

DAVID OBTAINS THE SHOW-BREAD

Here,

I. David, in distress, flies to the tabernacle of God, now pitched at Nob, supposed to be a city in the tribe of Benjamin. Since Shiloh was forsaken, the tabernacle was often removed, though the ark still remained at Kirjath-jearim. Hither David came in his flight from Saul's fury (v. 1), and applied to Ahimelech the priest. Samuel the prophet could not protect him, Jonathan the prince could not. He therefore has recourse next to Ahimelech the priest. He foresees he must now be an exile, and therefore comes to the tabernacle,

1. To take an affecting leave of it, for he knows not when he shall see it again, and nothing will be more afflictive to him in his banishment than his distance from the house of God, and his restraint from public ordinances, as appears by many of his psalms. He had given an affectionate farewell to his friend Jonathan, and cannot go till he has given the like to the tabernacle.

2. To enquire of the Lord there, and to beg direction from him in the way both of duty and safety, his case being difficult and dangerous. That this was his business appears ^{<0220>}1 Samuel 22:10, where it is said that *Ahimelech enquired of the Lord for him*, as he had done formerly, v. 15. It is a great comfort to us in a day of trouble that we have a God to go to, to whom we may open our case, and from whom we may ask and expect direction.

II. Ahimelech the priest is surprised to see him in so poor an equipage; having heard that he had fallen into disgrace at court, he looked shy upon him, as most are apt to do upon their friends when the world frowns upon them. He was afraid of incurring Saul's displeasure by entertaining him, and took notice how mean a figure he now made to what he used to make: *Why art thou alone?* He had some with him (as appears ^{<4026>}Mark 2:26), but they were only his own servants; he had none of the courtiers, no persons of quality with him, as he used to have at other times, when he came to enquire of the Lord. He says (^{<9004>}Psalm 42:4) he was wont to go *with a multitude to the house of God*; and, having now but two or three with him, Ahimelech might well ask, *Why art thou alone?* He that was suddenly advanced from the solitude of a shepherd's life to the crowd and hurries of the camp is now as soon reduced to the desolate condition of an exile and is *alone like a sparrow on the housetop*, such changes are there in this world and so uncertain are its smiles! Those that are courted to-day may be deserted to-morrow.

III. David, under pretence of being sent by Saul upon public services, solicits Ahimelech to supply his present wants, v. 2, 3.

1. Here David did not behave like himself. He told Ahimelech a gross untruth, that Saul had ordered him business to despatch, that his attendants were dismissed to such a place, and that he was charged to observe secrecy and therefore durst not communicate it, no, not to the priest himself. This was all false. What shall we say to this? The scripture does not conceal it,

and we dare not justify it. It was ill done, and proved of bad consequence; for it *occasioned the death of the priests of the Lord*, as David reflected upon it afterwards with regret, ^{<1022>}1 Samuel 22:22. It was needless for him thus to dissemble with the priest, for we may suppose that, if he had told him the truth, he would have sheltered and relieved him as readily as Samuel did, and would have known the better how to advise him and enquire of God for him. People should be free with their faithful ministers. David was a man of great faith and courage, and yet now both failed him, and he fell thus foully through fear and cowardice, and both owing to the weakness of his faith. Had he trusted God aright, he would not have used such a sorry sinful shift as this for his own preservation. It is written, not for our imitation, no, not in the greatest straits, but for our admonition. *Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*; and let us all pray daily, *Lord, lead us not into temptation*. Let us all take occasion from this to lament,

(1.) The weakness and infirmity of good men; the best are not perfect on this side heaven. There may be true grace where yet there are many failings.

(2.) The wickedness of bad times, which forces good men into such straits as prove temptations too strong for them. Oppression makes a wise man do foolishly.

2. Two things David begged of Ahimelech, *bread* and a *sword*.

(1.) He wanted bread: *five loaves*, v. 3. Travelling was then troublesome, when men generally carried their provisions with them in kind, having little money and no public houses, else David would not now have had to seek for bread. It seems David had known the *seed of the righteous begging bread* occasionally, but not constantly, ^{<1025>}Psalm 37:25. Now,

[1.] The priest objected that he had none but hallowed bread, *show-bread*, which had stood a week on the golden table in the sanctuary, and was taken thence for the use of the priests and their families, v. 4. It seems the priest kept no good house, but wanted either a heart to be hospitable or provisions wherewithal to be so. Ahimelech thinks that the young men that attended David might not eat of this bread unless they had for some time abstained from women, even from their own wives; this was required at the *giving of the law* (^{<1015>}Exodus 19:15), but otherwise we never find this made the matter of any ceremonial purity on the one side or pollution on

the other, and therefore the priest here seems to be over-nice, not to say superstitious.

[2.] David pleads that he and those that were with him, in this case of necessity, might lawfully eat of the hallowed bread, for they were not only able to answer his terms of keeping from women for three days past, but *the vessels* (that is, the bodies) *of the young men were holy*, being *possessed in sanctification and honour at all times* (~~5048~~ 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5), and therefore God would take particular care of them, that they wanted not necessary supports, and would have his priest to do so. Being thus holy, holy things were not forbidden them. Poor and pious Israelites were in effect priests to God, and, rather than be starved, might feed on the bread which was appropriated to the priests. Believers are spiritual priests, and the offerings of the Lord shall be their inheritance; they eat the bread of their God. He pleads that the bread is in a manner common, now that what was primarily the religious use of it is over; especially (as our margin reads it) *where there is other bread* (hot, v. 6) *sanctified that day in the vessel*, and put in the room of it upon the table. This was David's plea, and the Son of David approves it, and shows from it that mercy is to be preferred to sacrifice, that ritual observance must give way to moral duties, and that may be done in a case of an urgent providential necessity which may not otherwise be done. He brings it to justify his disciples in plucking the ears of corn on the sabbath day, for which the Pharisees censured them, ~~4128~~ Matthew 12:3, 4.

[3.] Ahimelech hereupon supplies him: *He gave him hallowed bread* (v. 6), and some think it was about this that *he enquired of the Lord*, ~~49210~~ 1 Samuel 22:10. As a faithful servant he would not dispose of his master's provisions without his master's leave. This bread, we may suppose, was the more agreeable to David for its being hallowed, so precious were all sacred things to him. The show-bread was but twelve loaves in all, yet out of these he gave David five (v. 3), though they had no more in the house; but he trusted Providence.

(2.) He wanted a sword. Persons of quality, though officers of the army, did not then wear their swords so constantly as now they do, else surely David would not have been without one. It was a wonder that Jonathan did not furnish him with his, as he had before done, ~~49804~~ 1 Samuel 18:4. However, it happened that he had now no weapons with him, the reason of which he pretends to be because he came away in haste, v. 8. Those that

are furnished with the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith cannot be disarmed of them, nor need they, at any time, to be at a loss. But the priests, it seems, had no swords: the weapons of their warfare were not carnal. There was not a sword to be found about the tabernacle but the sword of Goliath, which was laid up behind the ephod, as a monument of the glorious victory David obtained over him. Probably David had an eye to that when he asked the priest to help him with a sword; for, that being mentioned, O! says he, *there is none like that, give it to me*, v. 9. He could not use Saul's armour, for he had not proved it; but this sword of Goliath he had made trial of and done execution with. By this it appears that he was now well grown in strength and stature, that he could wear and wield such a sword as that. God had *taught his hands to war*, so that he could do wonders, ^{<19834>}Psalm 18:34. Two things we may observe concerning this sword: —

[1.] That God had graciously given it to him, as a pledge of his singular favour; so that whenever he drew it, nay, whenever he looked upon it, it would be a great support to his faith, by bringing to mind that great instance of the particular care and countenance of the divine providence respecting him.

[2.] That he had gratefully given it back to God, dedicating it to him and to his honour as a token of his thankfulness; and now in his distress it stood him greatly in stead. Note, What we devote to God's praise, and serve him with, is most likely to redound, one way or other, to our own comfort and benefit. What we gave we have.

Thus was David well furnished with arms and victuals; but it fell out very unhappily that there was one of Saul's servants then attending before the Lord, *Doeg* by name, that proved a base traitor both to David and Ahimelech. He was by birth an Edomite (v. 7), and though proselyted to the Jewish religion, to get the preferment he now had under Saul, yet he retained the ancient and hereditary enmity of Edom to Israel. He was master of the herds, which perhaps was then a place of as much honour as master of the horse is now. Some occasion or other he had at this time to wait on the priest, either to be purified from some pollution or to pay some vow; but, whatever his business was, it is said, he was *detained before the Lord*. He must attend and could not help it, but he was sick of the service, *snuffed at it, and said, What a weariness is it!* ^{<3013>}Malachi 1:13. He would rather have been any where else than before the Lord, and therefore,

instead of minding the business he came about, was plotting to do David a mischief and to be revenged on Ahimelech for detaining him. God's sanctuary could never secure such wolves in sheep's clothing. See ~~<814>~~Galatians 2:4.

~~<0211>~~ 1 SAMUEL 21:10-15

DAVID DRIVEN FROM ACHISH

David, though king elect, is here an exile — designed to be master of vast treasures, yet just now begging his bread — anointed to the crown, and yet here forced to flee from his country. Thus do God's providences sometimes seem to run counter to his promises, for the trial of his people's faith, and the glorifying of his name, in the accomplishment of his counsels, notwithstanding the difficulties that lay in the way. Here is,

1. David's flight into the land of the Philistines, where he hoped to be hid, and to remain undiscovered in the court or camp of Achish king of Gath, v. 10. Israel's darling is necessitated to quit the land of Israel, and he that was the Philistine's great enemy (upon I know not what inducements) goes to seek for shelter among them. It should seem that as, though the Israelites loved him, yet the king of Israel had a personal enmity to him, which obliged him to leave his own country, so, though the Philistines hated him, yet the king of Gath had a personal kindness for him, valuing his merit, and perhaps the more for his killing Goliath of Gath, who, it may be, had been no friend to Achish. To him David now went directly, as to one he could confide in, as afterwards (~~<0272>~~1 Samuel 27:2, 3), and Achish would not have protected him but that he was afraid of disobliging his own people. God's persecuted people have often found better usage from Philistines than from Israelites, in the Gentile theatres than in the Jewish synagogues. The king of Judah imprisoned Jeremiah, and the king of Babylon set him at liberty.

2. The disgust which the servants of Achish took at his being there, and their complaint of it to Achish (v. 11): “*Is not this David? Is not this he that has triumphed over the Philistines? witness that burden of the song which was so much talked of, Saul has slain his thousands, but David, this very man, his ten thousands. Nay, Is not this he that (if our intelligence from the land of Israel be true) is, or is to be, king of the land?*” As such,

“he must be an enemy to our country; and is it safe or honourable for us to protect or entertain such a man?” Achish perhaps had intimated to them that it would be policy to entertain David, because he was now an enemy to Saul, and he might be hereafter a friend to them. It is common for the outlaws of a nation to be sheltered by the enemies of that nation. But the servants of Achish objected to his politics, and thought it not at all fit that he should stay among them.

3. The fright which this put David into. Though he had some reason to put confidence in Achish, yet, when he perceived the servants of Achish jealous of him, he began to be afraid that Achish would be obliged to deliver him up to them, and he was *sorely afraid* (v. 12), and perhaps he was the more apprehensive of his own danger, when he was thus discovered, because he wore Goliath's sword, which, we may suppose, was well known in Gath, and with which he had reason to expect they would cut off his head, as he had cut off Goliath's with it. David now learned by experience what he has taught us (~~4380~~ Psalm 118:9), *that it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes*. Men of high degree are a lie, and, if we make them our hope, they may prove our fear. It was at this time that David penned Psalm 55 (*Michtam, a golden psalm*), *when the Philistines took him in Gath*, where having shown before God his distresses, he resolves (v. 3), *“What time I am afraid I will trust in thee; and therefore (v. 11) will not be afraid what man can do unto me, no, not the sons of giants.”*

4. The course he took to get out of their hands: *He feigned himself mad*, v. 13. He used the gestures and fashions of a natural fool, or one that had gone out of his wits, supposing they would be ready enough to believe that the disgrace he had fallen into, and the troubles he was now in, had driven him distracted. This dissimulation of his cannot be justified (it was a mean thing thus to disparage himself, and inconsistent with truth thus to misrepresent himself, and therefore not becoming the honour and sincerity of such a man as David); yet it may in some degree be excused, for it was not a downright lie and it was like a stratagem in war, by which he imposed upon his enemies for the preservation of his own life. What David did here in pretence and for his own safety, which made it partly excusable, drunkards do really, and only to gratify a base lust: they made fools of themselves and change their behaviour; their words and actions commonly are either as silly and ridiculous as an idiot's or as furious and outrageous as a madman's, which has often made me wonder that ever men of sense and honour should allow themselves in it.

5. His escape by this means, v. 14, 15. I am apt to think Achish was aware that the delirium was but counterfeit, but, being desirous to protect David (as we find afterwards he was very kind to him, even when the lord of the Philistines favoured him not, ~~OR~~ 1 Samuel 28:1, 2; 29:6), he pretended to his servants that he really thought he was mad, and therefore had reason to question whether it was David or no; or, if it were, they need not fear him, what harm could he do them now that his reason had departed from him? They suspected that Achish was inclined to entertain him: “Not I,” says he. “He is a madman. I’ll have nothing to do with him. You need not fear that I should employ him, or give him any countenance.” He humours the thing well enough when he asks, “*Have I need of madmen? Shall this fool come into my house?*” I will show him no kindness, but then you shall do him no hurt, for, if he be a madmen, he is to be pitied.” He therefore *drove him away*, as it is in the title of Psalm 34, which David penned upon this occasion, and an excellent psalm it is, and shows that he did not change his spirit when he changed his behaviour, but even in the greatest difficulties and hurries his *heart was fixed*, trusting in the Lord; and he concludes that psalm with this assurance, that *none of those that trust in God shall be desolate*, though they may be, as he now was, solitary and distressed, *persecuted, but not forsaken*.