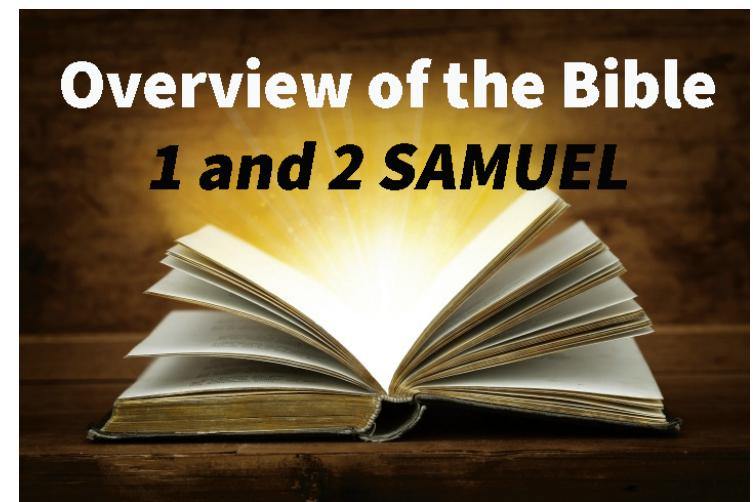


DAVID ON THE RUN

1 Samuel 21 Lesson 62

Wednesday, October 20, 2021
Pastor Blake Gideon



Big Idea Even when faith wavers, the Lord confronts his chosen servants with their divinely appointed destiny.

The Text in Context

As David left Jonathan, he knew that Saul was now fully committed to murdering him. The king tried to kill him in a variety of ways, but each time David escaped (chaps. 18–19), once through the Lord's direct intervention (19:23–24). Apparently unaware of Saul's latest attempts to kill David (19:9–24), Jonathan was confident that his father would not harm David (cf. 19:6–7). But when Saul rejected Jonathan's latest attempt to defend his friend, and Jonathan had to dodge one of his father's spears (20:30–33), Jonathan realized the truth and warned David. The situation looked bleak for David, but he still had a devoted friend and protector in Jonathan. The narrator keeps David's destiny before us through the words of Jonathan, who prayed for David's well-being (20:13, 16), expressed his confidence that the Lord would subdue David's enemies (20:15–16), and renewed his allegiance to the future king (20:17). Though David is still on the run, he has every reason to be confident: after all, David has escaped once again, the king's son has recognized David's destiny and is fully behind him, and the Lord has demonstrated his ability to protect David. But human emotions can be fickle, and in this next episode David's faith wavers.

Yet the Lord reminds David of his destiny and his past success, ironically using the lips of the Philistines to do so (21:11). David leaves the land of Judah, but to his credit, his humiliating experience in Gath reminds him to wait on God's guidance (22:3). Through a prophetic message from Gad, God calls him back to his own land to face up to his destiny (22:5). David has found a "stronghold" (*metsudah*) in Moab (22:4–5), where he feels secure, but it is time for him to realize that the Lord is his true stronghold and source of protection. Through the coming years, David indeed learns this lesson. Later, as he reflects on how God has delivered him from all his enemies (2 Sam. 22:1), he declares that the Lord is his stronghold (see 22:2, where the word *metsudah* is translated "fortress").

Historical and Cultural Background

First Samuel 22:2 states that "all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented" (ca. four hundred men) gather to David at Adullam. Later they hire out their services (25:4–8, 15–16; 27:6–11). Such mercenary groups appear elsewhere in Israel's early history (cf. Judg. 11:3–11; 1 Kings 11:23–25). These groups resemble the *habiru*, mercenaries mentioned in the Amarna letters who disturbed Canaan in the early fourteenth century BC. The *habiru* were organized into small groups, probably consisting of fifty to one hundred men. For further discussion, see ZIBBCOT, 288–89.

Interpretive Insights

21:1 Ahimelek trembled. Nob is located just two miles southeast of Gibeah, Saul's home, and it is likely that news of Saul's attempts on David's life have reached the priest. The reference to Ahimelek's fear sets the mood for this chapter, in which David himself will be overcome by fear (v. 12) and, for the first time in the story, is depicted as being in a panic.

Why are you alone? Why is no one with you? By quoting the priest, the narrator highlights David's vulnerability and introduces even more tension into the developing plot. How will David now respond, given that he is a wanted man?

21:2 *As for my men.* David makes up a story, claiming the king has sent him on a secret mission and that his soldiers are waiting for him in another location. But it is not until he reaches the cave of Adullam that any companions join him (22:1–2).

21:4 *consecrated bread.* According to priestly ritual, this “bread of the Presence” (v. 6) has been placed before the Lord, but it is then replaced with fresh bread on the Sabbath (Exod. 25:30; 35:13; Lev. 24:5–9; 1 Chron. 9:32). Once the bread is removed from the Lord’s presence, the Aaronic priests are to eat it in a holy place. Since David is in a desperate situation, Ahimelek is willing to bend the rules, provided David and his “men” have kept themselves consecrated for battle by refraining from sexual contact with women (cf. Deut. 23:9–14; Josh. 3:5; 2 Sam. 11:11–12).

Key Themes of 1 Samuel 21:1–22:5

- Despite being God’s chosen servant, David allows his faith to waver in the face of persistent and escalating danger.
- Despite David’s failure to stay focused on God, the Lord summons his servant back to his destiny.

21:7 *one of Saul’s servants was there.* By pointing out the priest’s fear (v. 2) and now informing us that one of Saul’s servants is present, the narrator goes out of his way to heighten the drama of the story. We (and David) suspect that this mercenary will inform the king of what has happened. In chapter 22 our worst fears are realized (cf. 22:8–9, 18–19, 22). Doeg’s Edomite identity marks him as an especially dangerous character to the exilic readers of the history, for by this time the Edomites are viewed as archenemies of Israel (see Isa. 34:5–17; 63:1–6; Obad. 1–21).

21:8 *I haven’t brought my sword.* David’s explanation is illogical. He obviously needs a weapon (or else he would not ask for one), yet he claims that the king’s business is so urgent that he had to leave without one. It is unlikely that a seasoned soldier like David would leave on a mission without being properly equipped for the task. Later David will show this same propensity to panic and speak illogically when under extreme stress (see 2 Sam. 11:14–15).

21:9 *There is none like it; give it to me.* David gladly takes Goliath’s sword (last seen in David’s tent following his victory over the Philistine champion; 1 Sam. 17:54). In his desperation David’s attitude toward this pagan warrior’s weapon has certainly changed (cf. 1 Sam. 17:45). In David’s defense, perhaps it symbolizes for him the Lord’s ability to protect him and give him victory against powerful enemies (cf. 1 Sam. 17:46, 51), but one wonders. David seems to view it as his source of defense, not simply as a trophy. The irony continues in the next verse as David flees to Goliath’s hometown to seek asylum.

21:12 *was very much afraid.* In a radically desperate move, David flees to enemy territory, seeking asylum with Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, located about twenty-five miles southwest of Nob. However, when he hears the Philistines referring to him as a king and recalling his military exploits against their armies, he gets cold feet. For the first time in the story, the narrator actually describes David as being afraid, and he emphasizes the point by adding “very much.” This is painfully ironic, for in chapter 17, just before David courageously met the Philistine champion’s challenge, Saul and the Israelites were paralyzed by great fear (vv. 11, 24). Now David, ironically armed only with Goliath’s sword and seeking asylum in Goliath’s hometown, is reduced to fear in the presence of a Philistine ruler because the once-fearful Saul is chasing him! Furthermore, he now is in the very position Saul has hoped he would be—in the power of the Philistines (cf. v. 13, “in their hands,” with 18:17, 21, 25).

21:13 *pretended to be insane.* In his great fear, David pretends to be insane, spitting on the doorposts. This description of David’s behavior contributes to the theme of this episode. Overcome by desperation, David is acting out of character, not just when pretending

to be insane, but also throughout this episode. There may even be an ironic parallel to Saul's behavior. When Saul threatened David, God's Spirit protected David by turning Saul into a prophet for a day and causing him to act in a bizarre manner (1 Sam. 19:23–24). Now David, having seemingly run from the Lord's care, must act in a bizarre manner to ensure his own safety. But David's attempts at self-preservation—which involve lying to a priest, trusting in a defeated enemy's weapon, and seeking a position in the army of a Philistine ruler—have backfired. He cannot escape his past or his destiny; ironically, the Philistines remind him of both when they call him "the king of the land" and recall his fame as a warrior (v. 11).

22:2 *he became their commander.* From Gath, David goes to the cave of Adullam, located about twelve miles east of Gath on the edge of Judah's territory. David, who has once served as a commander (*sar*) in Saul's army (18:13), is now the commander (*sar*) of a ragtag group of social outcasts. His prestige has slipped.

22:3 *David went to Mizpah in Moab.* Perhaps the king of Moab feels allegiance to David due to David's ancestry (on his father's side he is descended from the Moabite Ruth).

22:5 *Go into the land of Judah.* David has found security in the "stronghold" (*metsudah*) of Moab, and his wavering faith is recovering as he waits to see what God will do for him (v. 3). We are not told why the prophet tells him to return to Judah, but it is likely that the Lord views David's departure as contrary to his divinely ordained destiny.

Theological Insights

The exilic readers of the history can undoubtedly relate to David's circumstances and fears. They too are living outside the land of promise and feel vulnerable in a hostile world. They are tempted to focus on what they can see, but they need to focus on God and his promise. They have a divinely appointed destiny and need to look both backward and forward. In Isaiah 40 God reminds them of his sovereignty over the world, his commitment to them, and his intention of fulfilling his purposes through them. David's experience is a reminder to them not to panic or rely on their own meager devices to protect themselves. They must wait on God and trust him for prophetic guidance and supernatural enablement (see 40:31).

Teaching the Text

1. *God sometimes puts his people in a place where they must face up to their destiny and trust him, but danger can cause faith to waver.* God does not promise to keep his chosen servants from danger. On the contrary, in his providence he sometimes puts his people in a place where they must face up to their destiny and trust him. But danger can cause faith to waver, and God's chosen servants do not always maintain their confidence and perspective in the face of challenges. When faith wavers, one can lose focus on God and act in ways that contradict one's creed and experience.

David's experience illustrates this. When he faced Goliath, he remembered how God had delivered him in the past (1 Sam. 17:37), and he courageously challenged the Philistine, announcing that God does not deliver by "sword or spear" (v. 47). But in this episode David, overcome by panic and fear, asks for a "spear or sword" (21:8). He jumps at the opportunity to take Goliath's sword, declaring it to be an incomparable weapon (v. 9), and then goes to Gath to seek security from his enemies (v. 10). It is as if David is becoming Goliath, armed with his sword and going to his hometown. David is obviously walking by sight, not faith, and trusting in his own wits. When viewed from a strictly human perspective, his actions are perhaps understandable. After all, desperate times call for desperate measures, or so they say. But walking by sight eventually fails, and David, who has earlier lied to Ahimelek, is forced to live out a lie by pretending to be a madman. This denial of his real identity is the culmination of a series of actions that deny God's mighty work in his past and his divinely appointed destiny.

2. Even when his chosen servants falter, the Lord confronts them with their destiny. As David runs for his life, he acts in desperation, but the Lord does not turn his back on his chosen servant. When David denies his own theological creed by asking Ahimelek for a spear or sword (cf. 1 Sam. 17:47), the priest informs him that only the sword of Goliath is available (21:9). But Ahimelek, almost as a rebuke, describes the Philistine as the one “whom you killed in the Valley of Elah.” Whether the priest intends this as a subtle reminder or not, his words confront David with his past success and creed. Why would David want to use the sword of a warrior whom the sword did not protect? But even when he is reminded of his mighty victory in this way, David is so overcome by panic that he can focus only on the sword’s dimensions, as if it can provide deliverance.

When David arrives in Gath (armed with the weapon of the late Gittite champion!), the Lord uses the Philistines, albeit inadvertently, to confront David with his destiny and remind him of his past success. They call David “the king of the land,” as if they are aware of his private anointing by Samuel. They also recall the song of the Israelite women, who celebrated his victory over Goliath of Gath with the words, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (v. 11). But again, David misses the message and instead focuses on the danger that their recognition of him entails. His nearly fatal mistake in Gath apparently brings him to his senses, however. He is ready to wait on God, albeit in a stronghold in a foreign land (22:4–5). At that point, the Lord directly intervenes through his prophet Gad and tells David to go home to Judah. David’s experience is a reminder that the Lord pursues his chosen servants when they try to run away, whether due to fear or other reasons (cf. 1 Kings 19; Jon. 1).

Illustrating the Text

When believers allow their faith to waver, they ignore what God has done in their lives and deny their relation to God

Literature: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis. After Lucy has been to Narnia and comes back to tell the story, all her siblings doubt her and make fun of her. The professor stops this exchange by asking Lucy’s siblings if they have always found her truthful, to which they reply that they have. The professor then says, “a charge of lying against someone whom you have always found truthful is a very serious thing; a very serious thing indeed.” In the same way, if we have found God to be truthful in the past, our doubt is a serious thing indeed.

God will go to some lengths to get the attention of his people when they disobey

Bible: The story of Jonah.

Quote: “The Returning Backslider,” by John Bunyan.

A returning backslider is a great blessing (I mean intended to be so) to two sorts of men.... The uncalled are made to hear him and consider; the called are made to hear him, and are afraid of falling.... O brethren, saith the backslider that is returned, did you see how I left my God? did you see how I turned again to those vanities from which some time before I fled? Oh! I was deluded; I was bewitched; I was deceived: for I found all things from which I fled at first, still worse by far when I went to them the second time.... Ay, but this man is come again, wherefore there is news in his mouth; sad news, dreadful news, and news that is to make the standing saint to take heed lest he fall.... I would not tempt him that stands to fall; but the good that a returning backslider has received at God’s hands, and at the hand of Christ, is a double good; he has been converted twice; fetched from the world and from the devil, and from himself twice (oh grace!), and has been made to know the stability of God’s covenant, the unchangeableness of God’s mind, the sure and lasting truth of his promise in Christ, and of the sufficiency of the merits of Christ, over and over.¹

¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Mark L. Strauss, John H. Walton, and Rosalie de Rosset, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 140–145.