



## David's Faith Test: Saul's Insane Jealousy (1 Sam 21)

Notes: Week Twelve

### 1 Samuel 21 (HCSB)

#### David Flees to Nob

**21** David went to Ahimelech the priest at Nob. Ahimelech was afraid to meet David, so he said to him, “Why are you alone and no one is with you?”

<sup>2</sup> David answered Ahimelech the priest, “The king gave me a mission, but he told me, ‘Don’t let anyone know anything about the mission I’m sending you on or what I have ordered you to do.’ I have stationed my young men at a certain place. <sup>3</sup> Now what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread or whatever can be found.”

<sup>4</sup> The priest told him, “There is no ordinary bread on hand. However, there is consecrated bread, but the young men may eat it<sup>[a]</sup> only if they have kept themselves from women.”

<sup>5</sup> David answered him, “I swear that women are being kept from us, as always when I go out to battle. The young men’s bodies<sup>[b]</sup> are consecrated even on an ordinary mission, so of course their bodies are consecrated today.” <sup>6</sup> So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from the presence of the LORD. When the bread was removed, it had been replaced with warm bread.

<sup>7</sup> One of Saul’s servants, detained before the LORD, was there that day. His name was Doeg the Edomite, chief of Saul’s shepherds.

<sup>8</sup> David said to Ahimelech, “Do you have a spear or sword on hand? I didn’t even bring my sword or my weapons since the king’s mission was urgent.”

<sup>9</sup> The priest replied, “The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, is here, wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you want to take it for yourself, then take it, for there isn’t another one here.”

“There’s none like it!” David said. “Give it to me.”

#### David Flees to Gath

<sup>10</sup> David fled that day from Saul’s presence and went to King Achish of Gath. <sup>11</sup> But Achish’s servants said to him, “Isn’t this David, the king of the land? Don’t they sing about him during their dances:

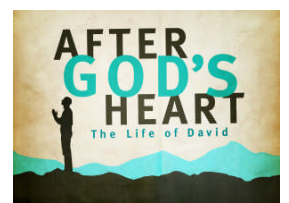
Saul has killed his thousands,  
but David his tens of thousands?”

<sup>12</sup> David took this to heart<sup>[c]</sup> and became very afraid of King Achish of Gath, <sup>13</sup> so he pretended to be insane in their presence. He acted like a madman around them, <sup>[d]</sup> scribbling<sup>[c]</sup> on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.

<sup>14</sup> “Look! You can see the man is crazy,” Achish said to his servants. “Why did you bring him to me? <sup>15</sup> Do I have such a shortage of crazy people that you brought this one to act crazy around me? Is this one going to come into my house?”

#### Footnotes:

- a. [1 Samuel 21:4](#) DSS; MT omits *may eat it*
- b. [1 Samuel 21:5](#) Lit *vessels*
- c. [1 Samuel 21:12](#) Lit *David placed these words in his heart*
- d. [1 Samuel 21:13](#) Lit *madman in their hand*
- e. [1 Samuel 21:13](#) LXX reads *drumming*



## Holman Christian Standard Bible - *Study Bible*<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Samuel 21

**21:1** Ahimelech is mentioned for the first time here; some identify him with Ahijah ([14:3](#)). Nob lay approximately two miles south of Gibeah. Ahimelech was afraid, probably because he had heard of Saul's pursuit of David, a fact that would explain his questioning of David.

**21:2** Though David said that the king had given him a mission, Saul in fact had not. David did not want to reveal his real circumstances to Ahimelech, lest Saul accuse the priest of aiding a fugitive ([22:13](#)).

**21:4** Consecrated bread, also known as the bread of the Presence ([v. 6](#)), came from the tabernacle, where 12 loaves representing Israel's 12 tribes were exchanged weekly ([Lv 24:5-9](#)). Normally only priests ate this bread, but Ahimelech was willing to share it with ordinary soldiers if they were not ceremonially unclean due to sexual relations ([Lv 15:18](#)).

**21:6** Jesus referred to this account in condemning the religious leaders for their rigid interpretation of the Mosaic law ([Mt 12:1-4](#)).

**21:7** Perhaps Doeg the Edomite was a captive servant of Saul after Saul's campaign against Edom ([14:47](#)). The words detained before the LORD may mean Doeg lingered at the tabernacle to offer further sacrifices and prayers; other interpreters have suggested he was paying some form of penance or facing punishment for an offense.

**21:9** The text does not explain how the sword of Goliath ended up in the tabernacle when David had earlier put it in his own tent ([17:54](#)). Perhaps David later had dedicated it to the Lord as some kind of offering.

**21:10** The leading Philistine city, Gath, was located at the mouth of the Valley of Elah ([17:1](#)). King Achish ruled there, seemingly as chief among the Philistine lords ([27:2-7](#); [29:2-4](#)). David probably fled from Saul by going westward into the Sorek Valley to Beth-shemesh ([6:9,12-13](#)), then along a diagonal highway that connected Judah's valleys to Azekah ([17:1](#)), from whence he could proceed down the Valley of Elah.

**21:11** Achish's servants were aware of David's fame among his own people, and they reported it to him. The tens of thousands David had killed included many Philistines.

**21:12** David became afraid when he realized how much the Philistines knew about him.

**21:13** In the ancient world, insane people were considered afflicted by the gods and generally left alone. David's letting saliva run down his beard brought further disgrace and confirmation of his affliction to Achish ([Num 12:14](#); [Dt 25:9](#); [Job 17:6](#); [30:10](#)).

**21:15** Achish's statement Do I have... a shortage of crazy people probably was intended sarcastically, though other people with unusual physical features were also associated with Gath ([17:4](#); [2Sam 21:20](#)).

---

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "1 Samuel 21".

## English Standard Version - Study Bible<sup>2</sup>

### 1 Samuel 21

**21:1-26:25 David's Escape from Saul.** David begins his life as a fugitive. He moves around from place to place, gathering a group of 400 men, which later increases to 600, sometimes acting as a protector, sometimes fleeing Saul. Saul, on the other hand, is single-minded in his determination to kill David. He destroys the priests of Nob for innocently aiding David, and whenever he gets some firm news of David, he pursues him with his whole army. David continues to respect Saul as king and does not kill him, even when he apparently has God-sent opportunities to do so.

**21:1-23:29 David's Escapes.** [Chapter 21](#) tells of David's visit to the shrine at Nob, and [ch. 22](#) tells of the disastrous consequences of that visit. Interspersed throughout these chapters are various other stories of David's flight from Saul.

**21:1 Nob**, a city between Jerusalem and Gibeah, apparently became the priestly city after the destruction of Shiloh. **Ahimelech** was the great-grandson of Eli (see note on [2:27-28](#)). Jesus refers to this incident as being "in the time of Abiathar the high priest" ([Mark 2:26](#)). Though Ahimelech's son Abiathar was not yet high priest at that time, the phrase identified him for Jesus' audience by the title he later held. (See note on [Mark 2:25-26](#).)

**21:2 The king has charged me.** David deceived Ahimelech the priest by implying that he (David) was on official business for the king. David's deception, however, resulted in the deaths of Ahimelech and the priests at Nob ([22:9-19](#); cf. [22:22](#)). Though David normally acted as an upright man, the Bible does not hesitate to record honestly his instances of wrongdoing.

**21:4-5 Common bread**, which might be eaten by anyone, is distinguished from **holy bread**, which, like sacrifices, could be eaten only by the clean (e.g., [Lev. 10:10](#)). Sexual contact was one source of uncleanness ([Ex. 19:15](#); [Lev. 15:18](#)), especially on a military expedition (see [2 Sam. 11:9-11](#)). The "holy bread" was the bread of the Presence of [Ex. 25:30](#); [Lev. 24:5-9](#); etc. Ahimelech was bending the rules, since only priests were allowed to eat the bread, and only in a holy place. However, Jesus endorsed Ahimelech's judgment in putting mercy before ceremonial law.

**21:7 Doeg.** Cf. [22:9-19](#).

**21:9 ephod.** See note on [2:27-28](#).

**21:10-15** David apparently had the idea of serving **Achish (into my house, v. 15)** as an anonymous mercenary, but he was recognized. It is not clear why they called David "king." They may be speaking ironically, mocking David. Or perhaps the Philistines used the word in a somewhat different sense from the Hebrew term; thus here Achish is called "king," though Gath is just a city, not a nation. "Achish" may have been a title or a common name for a Philistine ruler, like "Pharaoh" for an Egyptian king (see [27:2](#)). [Psalms 34](#) and [56](#) were in response to this occasion.

**21:14 you see the man is mad.** God's protection of David continues, as Achish is convinced by David's pretended insanity.

---

2. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "1 Samuel 21".

# NLT Life Application Study Bible<sup>3</sup>

## 1 Samuel 21

**21:1ff** This is the first time Ahimelech is mentioned. Either he was the Ahijah mentioned in [14:3](#), [18](#), or, more likely, he was Ahijah's successor. In either case, Ahimelech had to go against the law to give the holy bread to David because the bread was supposed to be given only to the priests ([Leviticus 24:5-9](#)). But Ahimelech put David's need and life ahead of religious ceremony and fed him the holy food. This upheld a higher law of love ([Leviticus 19:18](#)). Centuries later, Jesus would refer to this incident to show that God's laws should be applied with compassion. To do good and to save life is God's greater law ([Matthew 12:1-8](#); [Luke 6:1-5](#)).

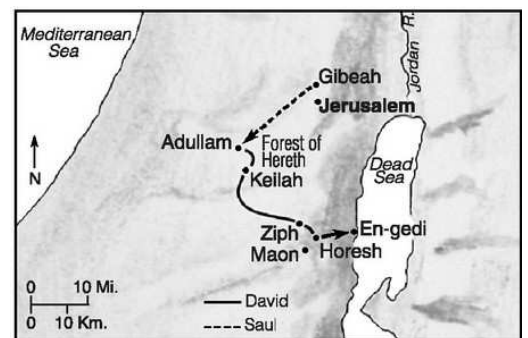
**21:2** David lied to protect himself from Saul ([21:10](#)). Some excuse this lie because a war was going on, and it is the duty of a good soldier to deceive the enemy. But nowhere is David's lie condoned. In fact, the opposite is true because his lie led to the death of 85 priests ([22:9-19](#)). David's small lie seemed harmless enough, but it led to tragedy. The Bible makes it very clear that lying is wrong ([Leviticus 19:11](#)). Lying, like every other sin, is serious in God's sight and may lead to all sorts of harmful consequences. Don't minimize or categorize sins. All sins must be avoided whether or not we can foresee their potential consequences.

**21:5** The men's bodies were ceremonially clean because they had not had sexual intercourse during this journey. Therefore, the priest allowed them to eat the holy bread.

**21:6** Once a week on the Sabbath, a priest entered the Holy Place in the Tabernacle and placed 12 freshly baked loaves of bread on a small table. This bread, called the Bread of the Presence, symbolized God's presence among his people as well as his loving care that met their physical needs. The bread that was replaced was to be eaten only by the priests on duty.

David and his men attacked the Philistines at Keilah from the forest of Hereth. Saul came from Gibeah to attack David, but David escaped into the wilderness of Ziph. At Horesh he met Jonathan, who encouraged him. Then he fled into the wilderness of Maon and into the strongholds of En-gedi.

**21:9** An ephod was a vest worn by the priest (see the note on [2:18](#) for a more detailed explanation). David didn't know Goliath's sword was there, probably because David was a young man when he killed the giant and he had spent much of his time at home.



*David Flees From Saul*

**21:10-15** Gath was one of the five major Philistine cities. Why did the Philistines allow their archenemy, David, into their camp? The Philistines may have been initially happy to accept a defector who was a high military leader. Any enemy of Saul would have been a friend of theirs. They could not have known that David had been anointed Israel's next king ([16:13](#)). Soon, however, the Philistines became nervous about David's presence. After all, he had slain thousands of their people ([18:7](#)). David then protected himself by acting insane because it was the custom not to harm mentally unstable people.

## Life Essentials Study Bible<sup>4</sup>

A Principle to Live By:

### **The Power of Fear**

from 1 Samuel 21:1-15

**When we become fearful, we must be on guard against the temptation to regress to attitudes and actions that are self focused.**

As Saul intensified his efforts to take David's life, we see a gradual change take place in the younger man's heart. Little by little, fear began to replace David's faith in God's ability to protect him. In many respects, this is understandable. The king had become his enemy ([18:29](#)). Humanly speaking, he had no way to protect himself; he would never raise his hand against God's anointed.

David's problem is one that we all face. He didn't trust God to deliver him. He had lost perspective on the past. He forgot about the lion, the bear, and the giant ([17:34-35](#)). Lost in a maze of his current circumstances, he took matters into his own hands. The results were tragic! Dishonesty became a part of his plans. Through Jonathan he lied to Saul about going to Bethlehem ([20:5-6](#)). When he visited the priest, he claimed to be on a secret mission from King Saul ([21:2](#)). And when he fled to Gath, he feigned insanity, a pathetic low point in David's life ([vv. 12-13](#)).

The apostle Paul is an example of standing firm in the midst of fear. When forsaken by all of his so-called Christian friends as he faced an evil Roman emperor, he gave this encouraging report to Timothy in the last letter he ever wrote:

*But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the proclamation might be fully made through me and all the Gentiles might hear. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever! Amen. ([2Tm 4:17-18](#))*

### **Reflection and Response**

*Why is it so easy to allow deception to become a part of our strategy when we try to solve problems in our own strength?*

---

4. Gene Getz, *Life Essentials Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2011), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 378.