

1 Samuel 20: Treason and Collateral Damage

I've mentioned before the difficulty in determining how far to go in each section of Scripture. You guys know me well enough to know I don't ever want to rush through anything. But often when we come to narrative sections it is actually helpful to cover a little larger area because I think it helps us understand the whole picture better.

When I was flying to Seattle a few weeks ago it was the first time I remember seeing Steamboat Rock from the air. I remember camping at Steamboat Rock as a kid and what I remember was this massive rock with some water around it. But from a jet, the impressive feature isn't Steamboat Rock. What is impressive is Banks Lake, the artificial lake made from the back water of Grand Coulee Dam that surrounds Steamboat Rock and is 27 miles long. Steamboat Rock looks like a little hill from 30,000 feet. But Banks Lake is impressive.

I think that's what going on here. When we see the larger picture, I think chapters 21 and 22 stand in stark contrast to chapter 20. In chapter 20 we saw Prince Jonathan pledge covenantal faithfulness to David as the future king of Israel. And that covenant loyalty came at a steep price. Because of his loyalty to David, he took his own life in his hands and the life of his family. They were very much in jeopardy from his father, Saul.

Here we have just the opposite. We have a man named Doeg, who functionally pledges his allegiance to Saul and betrays David. And here's the astonishing part: Doeg doesn't sacrifice his own life or safety. What Doeg does is actually slaughter the priests of God and their families because they're simply doing what they've always done.

So as we look at this whole section I think it's safe to say that it is all about betrayal. We're going to read it in a minute and we'll see some good stuff along the way. But I think we walk away from this passage with 2 things: First, betrayal of the true king is treason, just like Judas betraying Jesus was treason. Second, betrayal of the true king often causes collateral damage to the people of God. **Read Chapter 21-22**

So, again, there's a lot to unpack in this passage but from a larger vantage point I think the 2 elements that are inescapable are 1) betrayal of the true king is treason and 2) there is often collateral damage to the people of God when the king is betrayed.

So what we're going to do is just sort of walk through this passage and then tie it together at the end.

1) Setting of Betrayal - **Vss. 1-9**

This chapter is really a transition in David's life because from here to the end of the book David is on the run. Just in these 2 chapters - including **20:42** - David is said to have fled to somewhere else 5 times. In chapter 23 he flees 3 times. He - like Jesus - is basically homeless.

Matt. 8:20: And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

So homeless David runs from home to Nob where the high priest, Ahimelech, is. This is just northeast of Jerusalem - he doesn't run far because he needs very basic provisions.

In **Vs. 1** Ahimelech seems disturbed to see David - it says he was trembling when he saw David. That word trembling usually means fearful trembling. Ahimelech is likely aware of the controversy surrounding David. Saul's murderous rampage was probably well known. And the last time we saw Saul, the Holy Spirit had subdued him and caused him to strip down naked and prophesy with his other soldiers who were trying to seize David. And now here's David on Ahimelech's doorstep asking for help. There's a good chance something bad is going to go down.

It's at this point David is suspect of who he can trust. Saul's own household has been ordered to kill David. Jonathan has been ordered to kill David, though he would never do it. David knows he's a marked man and so when Ahimelech begins asking him about what's going on David doesn't tell him the truth.

Now we worked through whether or not it's acceptable to tell the truth to those who might try to kill us back in **16:1-5** when God himself gave Samuel an alibi for why he was going to a feast to anoint David. I don't want to rehash all of that - you can go back and listen to that sermon for more details - except to simply say that there are times where we are not obligated to tell the truth when human life is on the line. I say that because we see it here with Ahimelech, later with the king of Gath and we'll see it several other times. The Bible doesn't spend a lot of time pausing and addressing the moral difficulties so I don't want to either. Except to note the simple exception of preserving life.

David asks for 2 things here. He asks for food and he asks for a weapon. The weapon he gets in **Vss. 8-9**. It was Goliath's sword. You ask: How did Goliath's sword end up at the Tabernacle? Well, you could actually donate items to the Tabernacle as an offering. It appears that maybe David took the weapons he won from his battle with Goliath and at the very least he donated the sword to the Tabernacle. The sword was probably one of the most valuable swords available as the Philistines would have decked out their champion with the best equipment. In any case, David asks for a weapon and the only one available was that sword.

The other thing David asks for is food. Now this is interesting because the priests apparently had no common food. We have bags of bread lying around, refrigerators full of stuff, canned stuff in our pantries. But in ancient times and even now in more remote cultures they didn't have things just lying around. There was no refrigeration, no canning. Bread usually went stale very quickly so most people only made what they would eat right away. People would often make bread daily but just as much as they needed.

The only bread they had on hand was holy bread. If you remember in the Tabernacle there was the Tent of Meeting - where they would go. That tent had 2 sections: the holy place and the most holy place. In the holy place - the first room - was the lamp with 7 flames called the Menorah. The second thing was a small pedestal altar for burning incense. And the third was a small table that had special bread on it called show bread. That show bread was only for the priests to eat - no one else was to eat it. But David needed something to eat, and that's what the priest offered.

Now as a side: this probably happened on the Sabbath - Saturday - because that's when the bread would have been changed out. They made new bread and changed it out on the Sabbath (Lev. 24:8). So there was some wiggle room to give David the bread and still have the bread for God.

Now, if you remember from Jesus' own ministry he references this episode. **Turn to Matt 12:1-8**. Now, for Jesus and probably many Jews the moral quandary in 1 Samuel was not that David didn't tell Ahimelech the truth. The moral quandary was why in the world was David eating the show bread. And Jesus makes this interesting observation. **Read 1-8**

So here's Jesus's argument: Ahimelech the priest recognized David as the anointed king of Israel who needed provision for he and his men. So how much more should these guys recognize Jesus as the anointed King of Israel who can rightfully have provision for he and his men. Jesus says I am the true temple and I am greater than David. I'm the Lord of the Sabbath. I get to decide what a person can and cannot do on the Sabbath. Argument over. God gave exceptions to his rules in the OT for David, how much more authority does Jesus have as God in the flesh.

That's the real moral quandary in 1 Samuel 20 - at least from a Jewish perspective.

One final thought here is on the ominous mention of Doeg. We know almost nothing about Doeg except for this chapter. Doeg called an Edomite, he is of the lineage of Esau. You remember the Jews follow the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, 12 sons of Jacob are the 12 tribes of Israel. Well, the Edomites went Abraham, Isaac, Esau and the 12 sons of Esau. They were not the people of God, they were cut off from God's blessing and lived just south of Israel, just below the Dead Sea.

Some have speculated that since Saul went to war with Edom earlier in his reign Doeg was maybe a captive who pledged faithfulness to Saul, or that he was a traitor who gave information to Saul. The reality is that we really just don't know. Many people came to Israel from the nations surrounding Israel and found their way in

different positions. What we can say is that his being marked out as an Edomite is probably a little bit of a pot shot that he's not part of the people of God. He's an enemy of the people of God.

2) The Rise of the True King

Now, as I mentioned chapter 21-22 are set in contrast to chapter 20. This is Doeg's betrayal. But chapter 21-22 have a structure as well and it's kind of like a sandwich with 5 pieces.

The beginning has David, Ahimelech and Doeg. The end has Saul, Ahimelech and Doeg. That's like the bread - the outer edges. That's 2 pieces.

Then moving farther in is a story with 2 kings. There's the king of Gath - he's in the west near the Mediterranean Sea and the king of Moab, he's in the east on the far side of the Jordan River. Those are the 2 layers in from the bread.

Then you have the very middle where David is in a cave and people are coming to him. I think this structure is very intentional. When we first started 1 Samuel I mentioned that there were pieces like this called a chiasm - like a big X. And often what's most important is what's in the very middle. And I think that's true here. What's in the very middle of this sandwich, this chiasm, is that people are coming to David.

So let's look at the 2 kings, then we'll look at the very middle where people are coming to David before moving on to the last part. **Read 10-15**

So this is very unusual to most of us. Here's David going to the king of Gath. What famous person was from Gath? Goliath the giant. So here's David - the most famous Philistine killer - going to Gath. By the way, what's he carrying? Goliath's sword. That's insult to injury. Why in the world would he go there?

Well, there are basically 2 ideas. He may have tried to anonymously hire himself out as a mercenary - an unknown hired warrior. The problem with that is that David is very well known.

The other option is probably more likely. There's an interesting thing that would happen in ancient times that's hard for us to even fathom, and that's if a king was in dire trouble, he could often appeal to an enemy king and they would give them safety. Normally, we'd think: Kill the enemy king! But what ancient kings knew was that their lives could change rapidly and they might need to find safety and so there was this brotherhood of kings where they would take care of each other. They'd kill the other kings' troops, but the king would often be kept alive and we have several examples of this throughout the OT. In fact, do you remember when Saul was to kill the Amalekites back in **Chap 15**, who did he keep alive? Agag, the king. Why? Because kings often did that. He shouldn't have, but that was common practice.

So I think David probably went down to Achish thinking he could get security as sort of the king-to-be. But Achish's servants dissuade the king. They think he is the king already, but more than that he represents a true threat. The average king in ancient times didn't actually do any fighting - they sent the soldiers to fight. So they weren't much of a threat. David and Saul were different, and David was a serious threat having killed Goliath and many others.

So Achish is swayed by his servants. "Hey, this is the giant slayer" we really don't want this guy alive. Let's kill him while he's vulnerable. And it seems like maybe they convince Achish to do that, to go against the common practice of providing shelter. So David plays crazy. He starts hitting walls and dribbling down his beard.

Side: You have to understand that to defile any man's beard in the OT was a huge thing, no one messed with a man's beard. In fact David himself once declared war on a country because the country had messed with some of his soldiers' beards (**2 Sam. 10:4ff**)

So David is putting on a very convincing show that he isn't worth keeping and so he runs.

The second king - the king of Moab - is in **22:3-5. Read 3-5**

So here we see more of what I mentioned earlier - Moab was the enemy of Israel and yet they gave David and his parents safe passage until David could discern what God wanted him to do. It seems clear though that God wanted David to be in the land of Israel, not in a foreign country.

Which leaves the very middle of our story. We have David, Doeg, and Ahimelech mirrored by Saul, Doeg, and Ahimelech. Then we have two kings. And in the center of this whole story are these two verses. **Read 22:1-2**

Now who does that description remind you of? Jesus.

Matt. 9:35-36: And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matt. 11:28-30: Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This one description of David here in 1 Samuel is really the entire theme of Jesus’s life and ministry. Jesus has very little use for the rich and the spiritually proud, and those who are well-off because they have very little use for him.

Instead he goes to the lowly and the lowly come to him. His invitation and compassion is to those who are poor in spirit, who are meek, who are merciful because they desire mercy from God.

David and Jesus are cut from the same cloth. David, like Jesus his Lord, is the humble king who gladly receives even the least of society into his kingdom and protects them and conquers through them.

And the people who come to David are the lowest of the low. His family comes to him. That’s a little interesting. Why would they come to him? Well, it turns out from a brief record in **2 Sam. 23:13-17**. **Turn** over there.

This is the account of David’s mighty men - you remember them? **Read 8, 9-10, 11-12**

I just want to make one observation here. You remember when David killed Goliath? What were all the soldiers of Israel doing? Cowering on the sidelines, afraid. Every one of them except David. Then David goes and kills this uncircumcised beast and he becomes a commander of a thousand soldiers. You know what it appears he did? He taught them and trained them for battle. He didn’t just walk around playing the hero, he trained so they would be heroes.

So here’s what happens, he’s out in that cave and his family comes to him. Why? Because the Philistines had captured Bethlehem and the Philistine army had secured the valley between David and Bethlehem so he couldn’t get there. Somehow his family escaped and ran to David for protection. And while they’re all camped out in a cave, this little incident happens. **Read 13-17**

So most of us, if there were a standing army occupying our hometown and our leader was longing for a drink of good ‘ol Deer Park tap, we’d tell them, “Sorry, but you’re going to have to wait til things settle down.” Not these guys. Their love for David is so great - and they’re probably action junkies anyway - that they go full Navy SEAL, break through the enemy encampment in the Valley, sneak into Bethlehem which is locked down by Philistines, get to the well at Bethlehem - which all the soldiers would be around because that’s where everyone would be to draw water - and they bring some water for David. Who does that? Only those who truly love their king.

David is so overwhelmed with the situation that he actually pours out the water as an offering to God.

These are the people that come to David. And whom David loves and trains and leads. The same reason people flocked to Jesus in droves is the same reason they flock to David in droves.

So back in **1 Samuel 22**, all these people are coming. **Read 1-2**

All these down and outers. His own family, those who were in distress - or some of you have harassed. Those who were debtors - this would have been like people who are caught up in payday loan-kind of interest: 30% interest. Those who were bitter, who were utterly fed up with life and society and the way things were going - they all came to David.

They see in David the true king. They see in him hope and second chance. And where Jonathan pledged his loyalty to David in chapter 20, here more and more people are doing the same. David is the true king, the tide is turning from Saul to David.

Well, not all is rosy. At the same time that David is in hiding and people are pledging their loyalty to him, Saul is ordering the death of God's people. This section is unbelievably tragic on so many levels. We'll see the loyalty of Ahimelech and the betrayal of Doeg and the collateral damage that happens because of that loyalty.

3) The Downfall of the Faithful. Read 6-10

Saul now understands that people are siding with David over him. This is what he's accusing his people of. They are conspiring against him. And some of them probably are - Saul is a demon-possessed nut job. But it's here that Doeg - maybe thinking he could win some points for loyalty to Saul - mentions Ahimelech.

Now, here's the reality, Ahimelech's done nothing wrong. He He probably knew that David coming to him was going to potentially cause problems. But he didn't do anything that favored loyalty to David over Saul - and that's his defense. **Read 11-16**

Why wouldn't Ahimelech help David? David is Saul's son-in-law, captain of Saul's own bodyguard and favored. And Ahimelech has helped David before. He's serving God the way he's always done. But in Saul's madness, he thinks Ahimelech is a threat. **Read 17-19**

It's very sad. Even Saul's own soldiers won't touch Ahimelech - there's no guilt in him. So he has Doeg do the dirty work. The entire city is put to death - every last person and animal.

Back in **15:1-3** if you remember Saul was told to go put the Amalekites to death; they were the sworn enemies of Israel. He was to kill every last person and all their animals. And he didn't do it. Here, the priests and their families did nothing wrong and he has them all put to death. Only Abiathar, Ahimelech's son gets out alive. **Read 20-23**

I just want to make a few observations here.

1) Doeg's actions were an outright betrayal of both David and the people of God. And he did that all to win Saul's favor. Saul was a certifiable mad man at this point, his reign was only marginally legitimate. And whereas Saul's other officers refused to kill innocent blood, Doeg jumped in with both feet. Outright betrayal.

2) Betrayal will happen in our lives. It happened to David, it happened to Jesus, and it will happen to us. And it's always hard.

2 Tim. 1:15: You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.

2 Tim. 4:10: For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

1 Tim. 1:19-20: By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

When people betray the Lord, there's obviously a spiritual problem going on. But when that happens it usually affects us as well. And it's hard. You can feel the pain in Paul's letters as he laments how much rejection he had faced. Just know when people betray the Lord it has collateral damage to us as well.

3) Often times there's no resolution in this life. You know what happened to Doeg? We don't know. This is the last we ever hear about him. He slaughters all these innocent people and then he disappears from the Bible.

But he doesn't disappear from God. David wrote a psalm when he found out Doeg told Saul about Ahimelech; here's part of the song:

Psalm 52: 5-7: But God will break you down forever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*
The righteous shall see and fear,
and shall laugh at him, saying,
"See the man who would not make God his refuge,
but trusted in the abundance of his riches,
and sought refuge in his own destruction!"

It's not always wrong to pray like that. To pray for God's justice to come and break down our enemies forever. We long for God's justice over God's enemies who betray him and betray us.

But we also rejoice in grace. If you are distressed and harassed in life, if you need comfort and encouragement and forgiveness, you can come to Jesus just like they came to David. You can find salvation and forgiveness and grace and peace from the king of Kings.

Pray