

Whose Plans?

1 Samuel 21:1-22:23

Desperate times call for desperate measures. That great source of information, Wikipedia, can't identify the original source of this quotation. It's the idea that sometimes people get backed into a corner by various situations. And when they've got their backs to the wall, they feel forced to do things they wouldn't normally do. And so, for example, a person lost in the Blue Mountains for a few days, may become desperate for food. They may risk eating plants and bugs and the like – things they wouldn't normally eat. Or there are stories of people being trapped in wilderness areas – an arm pinned down under a rock or a tree that's too heavy for them to move. Some people have cut off their arm in order to escape.

What qualifies as desperate times? Some teenagers think the onset of a visible pimple qualifies as desperate times – or having to turn their mobile off in an exam. Some older people think not getting away for the weekend for two months is desperate times. I suspect our definition of desperate times is probably somewhat flimsy.

But, given we could come up with a proper definition, is it true that desperate circumstances justify desperate measures? If we're in real trouble, does it justify any action whatsoever? Does it, for example, give us an excuse to ignore God's wishes? Can we disregard God's word if we've really got our backs to the wall?

David's Desperation

1 Samuel 20 begins with David fleeing for his life. He goes to Jonathan and says:

Yet as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.

Jonathan doesn't believe him at first. He's still operating under the assumption of the oath his father made to him:

As surely as the LORD lives, David will not be put to death.

He's blissfully unaware of Saul's attempts on David's life that we're told about in 1 Samuel 19. But, after he's put his father to the test and had his father hurl his spear at him, Jonathan's firmly convinced David's life's in danger. And so, 1 Samuel 20 ends with Jonathan sending David away – fleeing for his life.

1 Samuel 21 shows us David fleeing – and just how desperate his situation is. The first thing he does is go to Ahimelech the priest. He's after food and a weapon – quite likely, the weapon's his main objective. His desperation comes out in the way he deals with Ahimelech. He's not totally honest with him. Well, that's a bit of an understatement – David's deceptive and dishonest.

- Some suggest it's because he's not sure whether he can trust Ahimelech. Even though David's the national hero, he's now on the run and not 100% sure where people's true loyalties lie.
- Some suggest it's because he tries to protect Ahimelech. He doesn't want to get Ahimelech into trouble and so concocts a scenario that absolves Ahimelech of any blame.

Yet, his story has several holes in it.

- What king in his right mind sends someone on a mission without adequate provisions? Even if the mission's urgent and there's not time to get everything together or to get your preferred equipment

together, you still don't send people out without the basics.

- And, if David's set off with this sort of urgency how can he know whether these men with him have kept themselves from women?

What are we to make of all this dishonesty? The narrator doesn't comment – at least not directly. It's worth pausing to ask: Is David here being held up as an example to follow? Here we have God's chosen and anointed king lying to get the things he needs when he's in a desperate situation. Is there a moral to this story?

- It's OK to tell lies when you really need to.
- It's OK to tell lies when your situation's desperate.
- It's OK to tell lies to get something that's necessary.
- It's OK to do these things if you're a king.

That's not what's going on here. Rather, two things:

- First, David's not the ideal king. On the human scale of things, you may be able to compare him favourably with others. Others may have done much worse in this situation. Yet, on God's scale of things, David fails. While he's God's anointed and God will see him take the throne, he's still flawed – like the rest of humanity. Ultimately, he won't provide the true king humanity needs.
- Secondly, despite David's deceitfulness, God continues to look after him. God provides him with bread. God provides a weapon. God allows him to escape from Saul. God's protection of David isn't dependent on David's innate goodness. God's grace extends to David despite his lack of goodness.

David gets his bread and he gets his sword and he heads

for the last place Saul would look – Philistine territory. Here we see the extent of David's desperation. Why on earth would he think Gath was a good choice? The Philistines have been listening to Israel's Top 40:

*Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands*

Most, if not all, those tens of thousands were Philistine. That's a lot of Philistine widows – and a good number of them would live in Gath.

And Gath was the place Goliath came from – the great Philistine champion. He was their hometown hero – their great contribution to the Philistine war effort. But he was struck down in his prime – some kid fluked this lucky shot. And now this kid wants to sneak in and hide next door to Goliath's mother. What's more, he wants to strut around with Goliath's sword hanging off his belt. It just doesn't seem to make any sense at all. That's how desperate David is to get away from Saul. Surely this has got to go down as one of the all-time stupid decisions in history.

Yet, God keeps David alive. He delivers him even in this situation. I mean, it's got to be God, hasn't it? We get this story about David acting like an insane madman. Maybe he was a good actor. Maybe he convinced them. So what? Can you really imagine them letting him go? Think of Goliath's family. Think of all those widows. They'd want him dead whether he was mad or not. This is God's doing. That's what David thought. Look at the last verse in Psalm 56 – a psalm that comes from this time.

*For You have delivered me from death
and my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before God*

in the light of life.

From Gath, David moves back to Judah. 1 Samuel 22:1
David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him.

People start coming to David. They stay with him. They acknowledge him as leader. God's anointed king begins to build a kingdom. Not that he's deliberately setting out to establish an alternate Israel. This just happens, as God draws these people to him.

At one level, it doesn't look like much of a group – people fleeing the law for various reasons; people discontent with their own situation under Saul's rule. Basically, they're a bunch of outlaws – hiding together in caves, scratching out an existence as best they can. It's not the sort of group you'd think would change the world. Yet, at another level, these guys are survivors. They've come through hard times. They've joined themselves to God's anointed king.

It reminds me a bit of Jesus' call in Matthew 11:28:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

And who responded to His call? Did not the greatest response come from the outcasts of that time – the people looked down on by respectable citizens and rejected by the religious leadership? And Jesus' call is addressed to those who know they're unworthy – to those aware of their sin and wickedness and status as God's enemies.

From this point, I think we see a calmer approach in David. His situation hasn't changed. Saul still wants him dead. He still hides as an outlaw and flees from place to place. But his approach seems more rational – less driven by the depths of his despair.

1 Samuel 22:3-4

From there David went to Mizpah in Moab and said to the king of Moab, "Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?" So he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him as long as David was in the stronghold.

He's gone back into enemy territory – to Moab – but not to enemies with whom there's current conflict. Presumably, he's gone to his relatives. David's great grandmother, Ruth, came from Moab. And, as he goes to the king of Moab, there's no dishonesty. There's no pretending to be mad. Just a straightforward request – and a reference to God and relying on His sovereignty.

Then, verse 5:

But the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not stay in the stronghold. Go into the land of Judah." So David left and went to the forest of Hereth.

It's a brief reference. It introduces Gad to us quite out-of-the-blue. It moves David back to home territory. Two important things to note:

- First, David has God's word. Saul no longer hears from God. He rejected God's word – he didn't pay attention to it – and so God removed His word from Saul. But God still provides direction for David.
- Secondly, David pays attention to God's word. Gad

gives him God's instructions and David listens. It's a contrast with how Saul reacts – especially since it appears to be a difficult instruction. Just as he's safely settled himself in this stronghold out of Saul's reach, he's told to go back to Judah.

I think we've seen David move through his desperation to a quieter confidence in God. In his despair, he did some wrong things and some foolish things. He's far from perfect. Yet, God in His grace, provides for him, protects him and continues to guide him – even, at times, in spite of himself. David's situation's still precarious. In human terms, his life's in the balance. But he's confident in God's promise – God anointed him as king and He will bring that about.

Saul's Desperation

The narrator now takes us back to Saul. He's been very much in the background while David's been on his international travels. But now he's having a cabinet meeting with his trusted advisers. Verse 7:

Listen, men of Benjamin! Will the son of Jesse give all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? Is that why you have all conspired against me? No one tells me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is concerned about me or tells me that my son has incited my servant to lie in wait for me, as he does today.

Well, I guess they're not so trusted after all. I doubt Saul trusts anyone anymore. His jealousy continues to eat away at him. He sees enemies lurking in every shadow. He appeals to his advisers' self-interest. He accuses them of withholding intelligence from him. Not that it's really

their fault – the intelligence they've supposedly withheld is simply a figment of Saul's own demented imagination.

But there's one bright spot for Saul. Verse 9:

But Doeg the Edomite, who was standing with Saul's officials, said, "I saw the son of Jesse come to Ahimelech son of Ahitub at Nob. Ahimelech inquired of the LORD for him; he also gave him provisions and the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

We met Doeg earlier – although I didn't draw attention to him on the way through. But the narrator did – back in 21:7, in the middle of David getting bread and a sword from Ahimelech.

Now one of Saul's servants was there that day, detained before the LORD; he was Doeg the Edomite, Saul's head shepherd.

As you're reading chapter 21, you wonder why the narrator puts in that extra bit of information. It has a bit of an ominous note to it (Saul's servant, Edomite) but everything goes along fine – until now. Now we find out just how ominous it was.

On the basis of what Doeg says, Saul sends for the priests from Nob – not just Ahimelech, but all the priests. He puts Ahimelech on trial. The accusation's in verse 13:

Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, giving him bread and a sword and inquiring of God for him, so that he has rebelled against me and lies in wait for me, as he does today?

How do you answer someone that paranoid? Saul's got all the earthly power on his side. Saul's trying to kill David – and yet he claims it's the other way round. There's no hint of David waiting to ambush Saul. Indeed, in the next few chapters, we'll see David refuse to kill

Saul – even when he had the perfect opportunity to do so. And if David's not out to kill Saul, how can you conspire with him to do so? But will it do you any good to tell Saul that?

Ahimelech answers very wisely. Verse 14:

Who of all your servants is as loyal as David, the king's son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard and highly respected in your household? Was that day the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not! Let not the king accuse your servant or any of his father's family, for your servant knows nothing at all about this whole affair.

He doesn't accuse the king. He doesn't tell the king he's wrong. He uses the appropriate court forms. He makes his case by asking questions. He appeals to the facts everyone knows.

- David's proved his loyalty in battle many times.
- David's part of the royal family.
- David's Saul's appointed bodyguard.

But Saul's not interested in real facts. He's only hears whatever fits into his conspiracy theory. His own inner sin – his jealousy and paranoia – blinds him to reality. He operates on the basis of lies – a frail web of deceit constructed in his own imagination.

And so he orders Ahimelech's execution – and all the other priests of Nob. His officials have more sense. At this point, it seems they fear God more than the king. They refuse to kill God's priests. But they don't prevent Doeg doing it. I'm not sure what sort of self-justification was going on in their minds – it's all right to stand here and watch all these priests be butchered unjustly, just as long as we don't do the deed ourselves. It doesn't really

make the grade, does it?

Here, in the midst of Saul's desperation, we see a couple of things. We see the seriousness of God's warning to Israel. They wanted a king like the nations. God warned them again and again about that sort of king – that such a king would take and take and take. Saul becomes more and more a king like the nations – instead of truly serving the people under God, he becomes more autocratic and he takes the lives of these priests.

We also see God's word fulfilled. Back in 1 Samuel 2, an unnamed man of God brought God's judgment to Eli. Eli's sons abused their priestly privileges and sinned sexually. Eli didn't kick them out of the priesthood. God said he would bring judgment on Eli's line.

- First, Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, would die on the same day. That happened in 1 Samuel 4.
- Secondly, the strength of Eli's line would be cut down in distress. That's what we see here.

And it's here we see the greatness of God's sovereignty. Did Doeg think he was doing God's will? No. Did Saul? Saul's acting against God with all his strength.

- He hasn't accepted God's judgment on himself and his own line – he's still trying to establish his own royal dynasty.
- He hasn't accepted God's judgment about David – he's trying to kill him and frustrate God's promise.

And yet, while Saul's actively working against God, he still achieves God's purposes. He brings God's judgment on Eli's line. That doesn't relieve Saul of responsibility. He acted wickedly. He acted according to his own intentions. He's responsible for his wickedness. But even his

wickedness doesn't frustrate God's plans.

God's Shepherd

The chapter finishes on a positive note. Verse 20:

But Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech son of Ahitub, escaped and fled to join David. He told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. Then David said to Abiathar: "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your father's whole family. Stay with me; don't be afraid; the man who is seeking your life is seeking mine also. You will be safe with me."

What's Saul achieved in all this bloodshed? He's wiped out the priests of Nob – except for one preserved by God. This one, he drives into the arms of David. So Saul's deprived himself of God's priesthood – and he's given it to David. That becomes significant in the next chapter – for Abiathar brings the ephod with him. Via that, David's able to discern God's direction. Saul, on the other hand, is confined increasingly to his own pitiful resources. The climax of that comes in a few chapters – when Saul's so desperate, he resorts to a medium to call up the dead Samuel.

David's response is twofold. On the one hand, he accepts responsibility for the consequences of his actions. He didn't kill these priests. But he recognises his visit to Nob led to that eventuality. He may very well have tried to spare Ahimelech from any blame.

- By turning up alone, he may have tried to sneak in and out of Nob unobserved.
- By spinning a yarn about a secret mission, he may

have tried to avoid implicating Ahimelech if he was questioned later.

But it doesn't work. Saul still blames Ahimelech and turns Nob into a cemetery. David took a calculated risk and it backfired. He doesn't try to shift the blame – as when Samuel confronts Saul. He acknowledges his part in the destruction of Nob.

The other part of his response is to invite Abiathar to join him. It's strange logic, isn't it?

The man who's seeking your life also seeks mine – so why don't you join me?

You'd think it'd be best to split up – make Saul divide his attention. For Abiathar, you'd think the safest place would be far away from David – for Saul's far more intent on tracking down David than Abiathar. There's a good chance he doesn't even know Abiathar escaped. Yet, David assures Abiathar: You'll be safe with me.

David's returned to a place of quiet confidence – not confidence in his own fighting abilities or his skill in finding hidden caves; but confidence in God. Samuel anointed him as God's king. That's God's promise that he'll sit on the throne. Saul may not like that. Saul may do all he can to prevent it. But you can't beat God. You can't stop God's purposes coming to pass. So, David knows he'll survive. He'll still face hard times. He'll still have Saul chasing him from pillar to post. He'll still take evasive action. But God will bring him to the throne. So, he'll be safe. He can offer that refuge to those with him.

I haven't found this a particularly easy passage. Not everything is clear. For example, does Ahimelech make some inquiry of God for David or not? If he does, what

answer does he get – and does that make a difference to how we interpret David's actions? The narrator doesn't tell us that. He just presents us with what's in our text.

What are we to take away from it? Here we see God's anointed king in a desperate situation. At times, it looks like he thinks desperate times call for desperate measures – measures that involve foolish and wrong decisions. Yet, the reality is desperate times call for trust in God – just as undesperate times call for trust in God. It looks like David has a refresher course in that lesson – and returns to a quiet confidence in God by the end of our passage. Through this period, God continues to protect His king. God draws others to him – a band of followers to lead. God enables him to provide refuge and help for others.

As God's anointed king, David points to God's purposes in the world. God's in the process of providing a leader – a true shepherd – for His people. That's been going on for centuries – people like Moses and Joshua and the various Judges. So far, they're all flawed. While most of them provided good leadership and were used by God to deliver His people from their enemies, none of them did it perfectly. They all struggled with their own resistance to God's will – with their own sin. Already, we see David follows in their footsteps. He will be king – but not **the** King. He will deliver Israel from her physical enemies – but he won't deliver them from the enemy within: their own desire to do their own thing and go their own way rather than follow God 100%.

For that King, we await the coming of Jesus. Unlike David, He fully trusted God. He's God's anointed King,

and yet He faced opposition. The religious leaders tried to kill Him again and again. They opposed His teaching. They accused Him of being in league with Satan. And finally, they handed Him over to Israel's enemies for them to execute Him. Wicked men freely pursuing their own plans – destroying God's anointed King.

Still, Jesus fully trusted God – even to the point of being killed. He didn't abandon His belief that God would cause to happen His promised purposes. And in that way, He came into His kingdom. He was enthroned as God's King. That's the King we need. That's the One who can truly shepherd God's people.

And via His death, He also offers refuge to others – to those who've had problems with God in the past; to those who know they deserve God's judgment; to those who are weary of lives ruled by their own sin. Jesus' death pays the penalty in full. It opens the way for us to enter God's kingdom. That's God's promise – and God brings about His purposes.

His promise isn't that we won't face desperate circumstances while we await Jesus' return. God's people face difficulties in this life. But the Shepherd remains with us. And the challenge is that desperate circumstances should not lead us to abandon trust in God. We aren't to use them as excuses to ignore God's word or God's will and to take things into our own hands instead.