

**INTRO:** In 2017, YouGov published results of a survey designed to reveal how susceptible Americans are to conspiracy theories. No one on either side of the aisle came out smelling like roses. Those of us on the left will smirk that “According to YouGov’s poll, 52 percent of self-described Republicans (and 46 percent of self-identified independent voters) believed that ‘millions of illegal votes were cast in the election.’” Yet those of us on the right will snicker that “that same YouGov poll found that 52 percent of self-described Democrats (and 39 percent of independents) believed that ‘Russia tampered with vote tallies in order to get Donald Trump elected president.’”<sup>1</sup> Apparently, we are all more susceptible to conspiracy theories than we think. Why? Because conspiracies justify our claim to victimhood.

In the Fall of 2013 Vassar College in New York endured a repeated cases of racist and sexist graffiti against a minority identity group. The newly formed Bias Incident Response Team was deployed to investigate, and after three months, the vandals were finally caught. One of them was actually a member of the intersectional identity group slandered in the vandalism, and also a member of the Bias Incident Response Team. The alleged motive was to draw attention to real forms of victimizing bias against minorities.<sup>2</sup> Yet the mentality that seeks victimhood status is not limited to the left. Conservatives are now making arguments that it’s the left that is privileged on campus. One author writing in a periodical said this of liberal college students; “It is a privilege when your views conform with those of more than 90 percent of your professors’ (Quoted in Bovoy, 2017:209)...[T]his suggests conservative critics of political correctness and campus activism can also appeal to victimhood.”<sup>3</sup> Who’s the victim now?

Our text this morning in 1Samuel confronts us with similar questions of alleged conspiracy and victimhood. And the question it poses to us today is whether we will take revenge on our enemies, or refuge in God. David goes from taking refuge in his guile, to taking refuge in his God.<sup>4</sup> This is also another historical account where we’re not always sure what exactly is happening; but that’s because the men themselves aren’t always sure. Welcome to exile with David, fugitive of so-called justice.

**READ 1S 21:1-9 (Cf Mt 12).** David’s best and maybe only friend in the world has just told him he needs to run for his life; but where to? David is alone and he doesn’t know who he can trust.<sup>5</sup> So where do you go when you don’t know who to trust? A priest might be a good bet. So he goes to Ahimelech in the priestly settlement of Nob. Now, David was already famous for killing Goliath and serving Saul. Songs were written about David. So to see David show up all alone makes Ahimelech tremble. What’s going on—is everything ok at the royal court, what happened? Why are you, of all people, all alone, out here?

And now the intrigue begins. David tells Ahimelech he’s on a secret mission from the King and he’s headed to meet a cadre of hungry soldiers. Got any bread in the pantry? And by the way, the matter was so urgent I left in a hurry and forgot my sword—do you have a spare? Ahimelech tells him the pantry is empty but he does have the holy bread, the bread of presence, that was reserved for the priests. But David is a stand-up servant of the King, and if his men are ceremonially clean for holy war...then what’s the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Noah Rothman, *Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America* (Washington D.C: Regnery, 2019), 150, 151.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.117; Rothman, p.161.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell and Manning, *Rise*, 163. Cf. N. Eberstadt, quoted in Rothman, 175.

<sup>4</sup> “These narratives show a developing appreciation of David’s role by others; Ahimelech had to be duped, the Philistines recognized David even if he had to feign madness, the oppressed gathered to him as a leader and the Moabites deal with him as a person of standing” (Apollos, 238). Yes, but perhaps the emphasis is not so much on the development of David’s reputation but the development of his character. He has to deceive twice before the transformative realization in 22:3 “*until I see what God will do for me.*”

<sup>5</sup> J. Baldwin, TOTC 147

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harm? Ahimelech then says there's no sword here but Goliath's, and David says "there no sword like Goliath's—that'll do fine. You're a lifesaver, Ahimelech. You have no idea." But wait a minute. What is this conversation? Is this a bold-faced lie about being on Saul's business? Is it subtle subterfuge, like "I'm on the king's mission" as if he honestly means King Yahweh even if Ahimelech assumes it's for King Saul? Or is this David trying to clarify the danger he's in to Ahimelech with coded language, with a wink and a raised eyebrow, like I'm on a "SECRET MISSION" that "NO ONE" can "KNOW ABOUT", I haven't eaten in a while, and I "REALLY NEED a SWORD"? Is he secretly asking for help but in a way that preserves plausible deniability for Ahimelech? It's not really clear quite yet how David is using language here.<sup>6</sup> It's clear that David doesn't know if he can trust Ahimelech. After all, Ahimelech is a grandson of Eli, and Eli's priesthood is not exactly known for integrity. But it's also clear David is trying to keep Ahimelech out of trouble with Saul. He's trying to manage the risk while he's on the run, both for himself and for this priest. Whatever the case, he talks in a way that if Ahimelech helps him, Ahimelech can still operate under the impression that he's helping King Saul by helping David who is supposedly on the king's business, but is really a fugitive of so-called justice. Plausible deniability, just in case.

And just in case is creeping just around the corner, because in the middle of that scene, the camera cuts to a dark alley where Doeg the Edomite is skulking around, seeing Ahimelech slipping David the holy bread in a handshake (cue minor key percussion on the soundtrack). You know the thing about Edomites? They're not Israelites. Scholars are probably right to assume Saul would have taken a guy like Doeg as a POW from the war in 14:47 where Saul fought against Edom. So Doeg is not an Israelite, meaning he's not exactly Mr. Scrupulous when it comes to the Ten Commandments or respecting Israelite priests. Doeg is out for Doeg. So David gets the help he needs, but Doeg is the fly in the ointment, and he will come back to haunt David.

Yet one thing is clear. Whether Ahimelech fully realizes it or not, he's doing the right thing. He prioritizes mercy to the needy over sacrifice and formality in religion. He gives the holy bread to meet David's need, even though the law said that holy bread was only for priests. That's right. And Jesus picks up on that in Matthew 12. His disciples are picking grain on the Sabbath, the Pharisees throw the book at them, but Jesus quotes this instance and then says in **Matt 12:6-8** "*I tell you something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, ' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*" That tells you a couple things. First, Jesus thought David was the real victim here, innocent but condemned, like Jesus and his disciples

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<sup>6</sup> R.P. Gordon calls David's "duping" of Ahimelech "despicable" (169, 175), and that Ahimelech's "guileless reply [in 22:14-15] bespeaks the man's innocence. In assisting David he had believed himself to be serving the cause of the king" (174). Bergen is sees more ambiguity: "David's answer may be taken as self-serving deception or as a shrewd but honest use of language... What he failed to clarify in his opening words to Ahimelech, however, was the name of the king to which he was referring. If it was king Yahweh (8:7; 12:12), and I am inclined to believe it was since David is elsewhere recorded referring to God as king..., then David was telling the truth" (R. Bergen, NAC 221). Firth affirms "the narrator retains a veiled ambiguity. Was David intentionally vague with Ahimelech because he knew Doeg was there, or did he not want to draw Ahimelech into his plans? Either way, David took a calculated risk that brought terrible consequences for the priests and the town of Nob, and admits his responsibility for this" (Apollos, 245). Yet it does seem clear that Ahimelech protests his own personal innocence and political loyalty to Saul in 22:15 when he says not of David but of himself, "*Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little.*" This contradicts my initial inclination to think David was communicating to Ahimelech in clandestine language that Ahimelech would have understood as a coded cry for help, as if with a wink and a frown. Ahimelech's protest of ignorance as self-defense in 22:15, however, is simply too comprehensive to allow for this possibility—unless Ahimelech is only denying complicity in a conspiracy theory, and otherwise defending David. This is how Baldwin takes it: "His conscience is clear and he speaks up for David, whom he has always respected" (TOTC 151). Ahimelech is thus caught between David and Saul, in the crossfire as it were.

themselves, and that Ahimelech was prioritizing mercy over sacrifice because Ahimelech knew God prioritized mercy over sacrifice even in David's day.

But of course the most important import is "*Something greater than the temple is here and The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*" Jesus is the divine physical presence that the temple symbolized, He's the bread of life, he is our fellowship with the Father, and Jesus gives His trusting people the rest that the Sabbath symbolized, even when we feel like we are on the run with nowhere to take refuge and no one to trust. But the story continues...

### **READ 1S 21:10-15 (cf. Ps 34)**

Apparently David feels like he's got to get all the way out of Israel to be safe, so he crosses the border into Philistia to ask the city-king of Gath for refuge. But beside the optics of David's walking into Goliath's hometown carrying Goliath's sword, David finds that the little song about his conquests had even gone viral west of the border. And the king's servants recognize David as the hero of that song. "*Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances, Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands*"? These are the words "*David took to heart,*" words that remind Achish that the ten-thousands that David killed were mostly Philistines like Achish from Gath and elsewhere. So David is afraid of Achish in himself. And David is afraid of what Achish knows, and that Achish and Saul would have shared David as a common enemy. Achish may tell Saul where David is. And now David is so scared he acts insane so that, whether they recognize him or not, they want nothing to do with him. And somehow, it works.

But what does all this mean? What's the real import of David pretending to be insane before Achish? Why go there in the first place? After all, David is a great warrior. He's the one who killed Goliath. What's he got to be afraid of? And all this time, maybe we should be thinking, why is David running from Saul at all? Why doesn't he just turn around, kill Saul, take the throne that God anointed him for, and be done with it? David will not treat God's anointed as his enemy or use his own anointing to serve or avenge himself. This is *contra* Saul, who does in fact treat God's anointed as his personal enemy and does use his own anointing to serve and avenge himself. David will run for his life and act as if he has lost his mind rather than take revenge on a king God had put in charge over him. That's how humble David is. That is what he is reduced to here. The great champion of Israel, the guy who got Goliath, is reduced to drawing public graffiti and drooling down his beard because he refuses to take revenge on the King of Israel who is trying to kill him. David will not treat a fellow Israelite as his enemy, even if it's Saul. That's how loyal David is to God's word and God's people, even when it's God's people doing him wrong and running him out.

**What David learned from 1Sam 21 in Ps 34.** David wrote a song about 1Sam 21, and that song preaches the gospel that David learned. **Ps 34:2** "*let the humble hear and be glad.*" **Ps 34:4-5** "*I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant...v6 this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him **34:8** "*Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. O fear the Lord you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack....those who seek the Lord lack no good thing...I will teach you the fear of the Lord."* **34:18** "*the lord is near to the broken hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. **34:22** "*none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.*" It seems like this is where David learns to fear God more than man, and to take refuge in God rather than in his own schemes. And we get a hint of that maturity being born out as the account continues in 1Sam 22:1-5.**

### **READ 1Sam 22:1-5 (Refuge cf Ps 57; 142; Mk 1:32-34)**

David takes refuge, not revenge (v1a). He doesn't fight back. He escapes and hides. Then in v.2, David does not seek a following; he attracts one (v.1b-2; Mk 1:32-34). His family comes to him, probably for protection from Saul. And now the riff raff join him, about 400 men, and this unpromising group becomes his army. He goes to Moab, and here again scholars are probably right to point out that David may be leveraging Great-grandma Ruth's heritage as a Moabitess to secure his family. And then we get this note in v.3, "until I know what God will do for me." There it is. There's the David we know and love. There's the Psalmist. We're not sure what to make of how David talks and acts in chapter 21. He seems like a different David there. But here in chapter 22 he starts talking like the David we're used to reading and seeing. He obeys the fifth command while being sinned against under the sixth (v.3-4). In other words, while Saul is hunting him, David is caring for his parents and obeying a prophet, and refusing to take vengeance on Saul as an unrighteous authority figure sinning against him. All this, from a man who knows he is anointed as the next king. David will give up his rights before he compromises his righteousness. How did he do that? He tells us how in Psalm 57.

**Psalm 57.** V.1 *"in you my soul takes **refuge**; in the shadow of your wings I will take **refuge**, till the storms of destruction pass by....He will send...He will put to shame...God will send out **his steadfast love** and his **faithfulness**...My heart is **steadfast** of God, my heart is **steadfast**... I will sing...I will give thanks...I will sing...For **your steadfast love** is great to the heavens, **your faithfulness** to the clouds.* David is steadfast for others because God's love is steadfast for Him.

**Ps 142:2-6** *"I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him. When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no **refuge** remains to me; no one cares for my soul. I cry to you, O Lord; I say, "you are my **refuge**, my portion in the land of the living.' Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low!"* David does complain, but only to God. That is where David seeks refuge, in prayer, in God. Saul will feign victimhood to others in the paragraph to come. David takes his real injuries to God.

### **READ 1Sam 22:6-10 (cf. Ps 52)**

That is rich. Saul is sitting in his home town, Gibeah (violence), among his Benjaminite family (retreating to tribalism and insularity), with a spear in his hand (defensive). Saul needs a campaign rally in his home town. Time to whip up the base with the politics of fear and guilt. "If David becomes king, where do you think all your government jobs are gonna go, that I gave you? They'll go straight to Judah, because that's where David's from. And that's where all your perks will go, too—fields, vineyards, the whole shebang. "David is not the jobs and prosperity guy for our tribe—I am! Take his side and the local economy in Benjamin will tank."

And now in v.9 it gets really pathetic, because he's asking those questions in v.9 because he's in his own head about a conspiracy theory. Do you think David will give you more than I've given you, "that you have all conspired against me?" What is David promising you? Everyone is holding out on me. No one tells me anything. No one feels sorry for me. Wow. That's in the Bible. A king of Israel saying "*None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in wait as at this day.*" That's just embarrassing out of a leader, right? From reading the whole narrative, we know this is pathetic. David's not lying in wait to kill you. That's a conspiracy theory rooted in a projection. He's running for his life because you're the one lying in wait for him!

**But Saul's feelings don't care about facts.** Saul is so suspicious and paranoid that he's deceived himself into believing that he's the victim, when in fact he's the one victimizing David the whole time. He blames

his own son for his covenanted friendship with David, wallows in self-pity, projects his own homicidal intentions onto David, and then manipulates his own tribe with the logic of bribery. “help me help you. If you want to keep your fields and vineyards and your powerful government jobs in the military, then you’ve gotta do the right thing, come clean, tell me where David is, I’ll pin him to the wall, And I’ll keep my job so you can keep yours. But if I’m not your head, you’ll be out on your ear.” Ah, is that what godly leadership looks like? No, that’s what it looks like to have a king like all the other nations. Israel sowed the wind and now they’re reaping the whirlwind. And this is what human power looks like when it becomes desperate. David pretended to be crazy, but Saul really is crazy.

Saul is not the victim he claims to be, because even though Saul’s feelings don’t care about the facts, what really matters is that **the facts don’t care about Saul’s feelings**. David is the victim, no matter how Saul feels, no matter how Saul spins it. And yet, David is not the one claiming victimhood as he could. David doesn’t run to Ahimelech saying “No one feels sorry for me.” David might pray like that privately; but he doesn’t talk like that, even to his own family in the cave of Adullam. David never throws a pity party, and never throws anyone under the bus...not on purpose, anyway.

Yet as the camera pans over the campaign rally crowd, who does it find in v.9 but Doeg the Edomite! Bad guy alert. Doeg is more than ready to tell Saul what he wants to hear. “I saw Jesse’s son talking with Ahimelech at Nob, and Ahimelech sought God’s will for him, gave him bread and even a sword.” And that is all Saul needs to hear in order to convene a kangaroo court in vv.11-23.

### **READ 1Sam 22:11-23**

Saul summons the whole priesthood at Nob to come to Gibeah—all of them. And when he calls Ahimelech, Ahimelech answers “*Here I am, my lord.*” That seems awfully confident for the circumstances as we understand them; but it is the voice of a clear conscience. Ahimelech has nothing to fear from his own perspective. But Saul accuses him of conspiracy to commit treason and even regicide. Yes, Ahimelech prayed for David, gave him bread and a sword, but not to conspire to kill Saul and steal the throne. So Ahimelech first defends David and then himself. Ahimelech says David is the most faithful guy you’ve got, whether you know it or not. He’s your son-in-law, for crying out loud. That’s why I used to inquire of God all the time for him. David would never try to kill you! There’s no conspiracy against you here, Saul, either in David, or in me, or in any of the priests at Nob. Yes, I inquired for him this time like I did a thousand times before, but I don’t know anything about any conspiracy!” Yet that is the narrative that Saul keeps telling himself. In 22:8 Saul says on the campaign trail “all of you have conspired against me,” and that *Jonathan stirred up David against me to lie in wait*. And now again here *Why have you conspired against me...so that David has risen against me, to lie in wait as at this day?*” Saul is now so paranoid that he sees treason in Ahimelech’s motives based on nothing but the uncorroborated testimony of an Edomite. I know why you did what Doeg saw you do— “*so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?*” That’s not truth. David is not rising against Saul or lying in wait. And even if he were, Ahimelech was under the impression that David was serving Saul.

But Saul keeps telling that self-serving, self-pitying narrative to justify his own power and paranoia and victimhood status, and now he’s implicating Ahimelech in that same false narrative. This conspiracy theory is fake news based on the false witness of a foreign national, and it’s used to condemn an innocent priest and keep a corrupt king in power. Everybody is biased against Saul. Everyone is betraying Saul. Saul is all alone, no one feels sorry for him. No one defends him. No one appreciates him. No one is honest with him. No one gives him any credit. You’d think he were righteous or something. But facts don’t matter to Saul’s narrative. Neither does character.

Saul's narrative has not only substituted for truth. It has blinded him to the truth, and made him deaf to any testimony that would contradict his narrative. Saul actually hears Ahimelech's stellar defense not as a reason to acquit, but as a reason to convict. "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house." He attributed motive from an uncorroborated reporting of fact, and Saul is now sure that he's right to convict. Saul is so out of touch that if you contradict his victim narrative, he will kill you and everyone in your family. "*Turn and kill the priests of the Lord (!), because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me.*" Whoa Whoa whoa, wait a minute. Read back the transcript. "*you knew that he fled??*" That's a slip of the tongue if there ever was one. Which is it, Saul—is David lying in wait, or running for his life? Makes you begin to wonder, maybe Saul really does know the truth—and he's just suppressing it. Yet the more Saul sees himself losing power, the more he begins abusing it.

Well, Saul's servants rightly blanch at killing the priests, because most of them are Israelites who actually care about the priesthood. Not Doeg. In fact, if Doeg knows anything about Israelite culture, he knows about the *herem* ban during holy war. Saul and Doeg execute the equivalent of the *herem* ban that should have applied only to corrupt local Canaanites who would have corrupted Israel with immorality and idolatry. This is a **reverse holy war** that Doeg carries out on the priestly city of Nob, at the command of the King of Israel. In fact, Saul does to Ahimelech what he refused to do to Amalek.<sup>7</sup> He killed everything that breathed in Nob.

Yet ironically, it is the fulfillment of God's curse on Eli's house in **2:31-33** "*Behold days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house so that there will not be an old man in your house....The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men.*" And here it happens, and Abiathar is the only one not cut off. From a human perspective, there is nothing righteous about this. Nothing can justify judicial mass murder, especially when due process is only given lip service. But here in 1 Samuel, Saul's injustice executes God's justice on Eli's corrupt priesthood.

**V.20-23** David learns a lesson. He knew Doeg would be the death of someone. And David feels responsible for what happened. So he tells Abiathar to stay with him in safekeeping, since they're in the same boat. The difference is, David the soldier can protect Abiathar is a priest as he weeps his eyes out. Abiathar is a trophy of God's mercy to the house of Eli. But he is only saved in loyalty to David.

David wrote Psalm 52 about this experience with Doeg. "*The steadfast love of God endures all day....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. But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. I will thank you forever and ever, because you have done it. I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly.*" That's David's attitude under injustice. Is it yours?

**Even a man after God's own heart will be falsely accused (David).** David did nothing wrong, yet Saul perceives him as a threat to his power. That's how Herod treated Jesus from the day Jesus was born. It's how the Jewish leaders treated Jesus until the day he died. It's how they treated Paul even after Jesus rose from the dead. And it is how the world has sometimes treated Christians. When the world falsely accuses Christians of evil, based on a false narrative, our responsibility is to keep our conduct pure and honorable. We don't take revenge on our enemies. We take refuge in God.

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<sup>7</sup> This observation is also confirmed by Baldwin (TOTC 151), Bergen, and Firth, among others.  
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**Christians take refuge in God, not revenge on our enemies.** That is the example set for us both by David and by Jesus. All through these two chapters, and beyond, we see David time and again refusing to take vengeance, and instead taking refuge in God through prayer. Is there a time to resist or litigate? Eventually, perhaps. But this passage does not teach us the point at which to resist. It teaches us how far off that point normally is for most of us. Look at David's example of enduring personal injustice with zero retaliation. Saul is literally putting out a royal hit on his life. And David does not take vengeance, even though violence is well within David's wheelhouse. David takes refuge. So before we insist on our rights, we intercede for those who do us wrong. We pray about our hurts and grievances and injustices to the just God who hears our prayers and is powerful to answer. We wait to see what God will do for us. We should be marked more by praying than prosecuting. Christians do not use political power to execute social vengeance against groups. The anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. But once God is rejected, justice disintegrates. The reason is that God's personal moral character is the origin, ground, and gravity of the moral universe. Justice can only be built on the concrete foundation of moral truth. Otherwise, it's a house of cards.

**Justice must be grounded in objective truth, not personal tantrums or false narratives.** False witness cannot be the ground of true justice. Revisionism never leads to righteousness. Truth matters, because reality is impervious to our feelings about it. Saul's feelings about himself, and David, and God, did not change the facts about his own guilt, or David's innocence, or God's judgment. And our feelings about ourselves, and others, and God, do not change the facts about ourselves, or others, or God. Justice matters precisely because truth matters. Justice is a community's attempt at living by the standard of moral truth. Cultures must live, and reward, and punish, based on truth. Cultures that live and reward and punish based on lies are dishonest, immoral, corrupt, and they multiply injustice, even when they tell themselves that their governing lie is a noble one intended to manufacture a more ideal justice that remains elusive. But truth matters to us as humans because we are made in the image of a true God who loves truth, and who is always true to His own word and commitments. But if justice is to be grounded in objective truth, then objective truth, both moral and otherwise, must in turn be grounded in God's transcendence. God's transcendence—his authoritative otherness, his over-and-above-us-ness—is the only reality solid and immovable enough, good and righteous enough, strong and steady enough, to stabilize a moral and physical world that is spinning through space and hurtling through time. Why, how is it, that we can see through the false narrative of Saul's victimhood from 3,000 years away? Because truth does not change. And God does not change. A false narrative is still false, no matter how many times you re-tell it, or why. And therefore, it cannot be the basis of a just world.

**Godlessness leads to people and societies to paranoia, false victimhood narratives, tribalism, and vengeance.** That's what we see here. Remember how Saul's descent started. It started with his rejection of God. Samuel told in in 15:26 "*you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.*" 1Samuel 21-22 is the result of 1Samuel 15. Without God's word as his rule and standard, Saul is adrift. He feels he has to fend for himself. He becomes paranoid. He entertains false narratives of his own victimhood. He retreats into his own tribe, Benjamin, and begins whipping up his base, or at least putting them on a guilt trip. He then pits his own tribe against David's tribe, when they're all Israelites! But what else can Saul do? Without the God who says "vengeance is mine," Saul must predicate that sentence of himself. Vengeance is mine. I will repay. The problem is, no one is as just as God is, because we are tempted to repeat any narrative that makes us the victim who deserves to seek vengeance, and all too often, it's our own feelings that don't care about the facts. And the facts are, the while some of us may be victims in some limited sense, all of us are criminals against God's law, and rebels against His love. And we often don't know how to feel about any of these things. And yet...

**God is sovereign over all our moral ambiguities, whether we don't know what to do, or whether think we know what we're doing and we don't.** This text draws you into the narrative's moral ambiguity, so well in fact that parts of this narrative are hard for us to understand. It's especially hard to tell exactly how David is communicating with Ahimelech, and why. And when Ahimelech testifies, it's like his own iron-clad defense becomes the whole reason for his execution. There's a disorientation to it all, it's unsettling to us. It raises questions for us. But that unsettled feeling is the experience of the characters. Sometimes David and Ahimelech and Saul don't know exactly what they're doing, and other times they think they know what they're doing, they think they know they have the right information, they think they know how to serve their own interests best, they think they're operating truthfully, and they have it all wrong without knowing it, or they've deceived themselves, or their actions have unforeseen and unintended consequences. Friend, you and I are confused in this text, because Ahimelech is fooled by David, and David is afraid of Saul and Achish, and Saul is paranoid about everybody, and the whole case against Ahimelech's family is based on the false witness of a political mercenary.

This is the confused moral world we live in when we take from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and try to decide what's right and wrong for ourselves based on a false narrative that God is not really holy or good or even real, and we are not really sinful. WE come out of this story thinking that the only thing we may know about it for sure is that God judged Eli's corrupt priesthood by killing all these priests. But that in itself is a place to stand. God word is still driving the narrative, whether the people in the narrative know it or not, even if the people in the narrative are busy re-writing their own narratives. No matter how complex and confusing reality gets to us, God is sovereign over all that confuses us, over all we cannot explain or understand. He is in control when we are so desperate that we don't know what to do, or when we think we know what we're doing and we really don't. And what's more...

**God is merciful to the sins and fears of those whose hearts take refuge in Him.** David is not as smooth an operator as he might have imagined. He tries to be shrewd with Ahimelech and ends up getting his whole family executed and the city of Nob burned to the ground and 85 men killed, because Doeg beat David at his own game. That is not what he intended to happen, and he feels responsible for it in the end, even guilty. But here is what distinguishes David from Saul. Saul takes revenge. David takes refuge. *"Until I know what God will do for me..."* That is the difference—trust in God. That's not just the difference between David and Saul. That the difference between David in chapter 21 and David in chapter 22. And that statement comes from the richness of a prayer life that produced refuge songs like Psalm 34, 57, 142, and many others. David may be innocent of treason, but he's far from sinless. Yet God is merciful to him in his sins and in his fears because though David is sinful, he takes refuge in God.

Friend what does this text reveal about your own heart? Are you taking revenge on your enemies, or are you taking refuge in Jesus? Archibald Alexander was a theology professor at Old Princeton. At the last alumni pastor's conference before his death, he encouraged his former students to take refuge in Jesus' presence and promises, as we saw David taking refuge in God during his exile from power:

"Some of you may be subjected to many privations, and to heavy toils, in obscure stations; where, separated from polished and enlightened society, and even from much [conversation] with your brethren, your hearts may become discouraged, and you may feel as if you were forgotten by all; but remember, that however you may live unnoticed by men, there is One whose watchful eye never loses sight of you, and whose sympathizing heart bears a part in all your sorrows. There is One, who has promised, that he will never leave you nor forsake you,' and that he will 'be with

you always, even to the end of the world.’ This friend, ‘who sticketh closer than a brother,’ has power as well as compassion; and has pledged his word, that all things shall work together for good, to them who love him. And in due season, he will reward you openly, for all the sufferings and labours endured for his sake.”<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> Archibald Alexander, “The Pastoral Office” in *The Pastor: His Call, Character, and Work* (Carlisle PA: Banner of Truth, 2020), pp.113-114.  
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