

Desperate Times, Hopeful Measures

1 Samuel 21

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

Psalm 56:3-4

Introduction: *“Desperate times call for desperate measures”*. This statement, attributed to Hippocrates, the famous Greek who fathered an oath taken by modern doctors who justify extreme medical cases require drastic treatments. If you have ever been in a position of desperation you can relate to this quote. Have you ever been in such physical pain or discomfort that you’d do ANYTHING to get out of it? I remember when I was blessed with gallstones the first time, travelling down from Shaver Lake in excruciating pain for no known reason, finding no solace in any position, crying *“Maranatha”* and hoping Jesus would return before getting to the hospital. Or if you’ve been in such financial straight that you are willing to sell precious valuables or accrue even more debt to simply try to make it through the day. Or some have become desperate in their stage of life, willing to join with another even though they do not have the qualifications or character, but in the moment seeming to be better than loneliness. Or have you ever felt such overwhelming fear and pressure that you turn to substances that you NEVER thought you would, do things you know are wrong, or think things you know are untrue?

The position and feeling of desperation is NOT uncommon. In fact, it would be a bigger anomaly if you’ve NEVER felt this way than if you had. Though common, desperation can lead to unholy measures, revealing a lack of faith and trust in the Lord and actually compounding our desperation. This morning we will look at an episode in David’s life that was strained, pressured, and in a word, *desperate*. In light of the circumstances, he yielded briefly to fear, making decisions and conducting himself in a way that was out of character until this point. However, we will also see God’s faithfulness and care through it all, and we have an opportunity to learn, as David did, through and beyond this episode.

A Desperate Situation

‘And David rose and fled that day from Saul...’

Verse 10 sums up the next few chapters in David’s life, as he is now a fugitive, constantly on the run, not knowing who to trust or where to turn. This will be a chapter of *isolation*, between his time with Jonathan in ch. 20 and a gathering of 400 people in ch. 22. Desperation and isolation go hand in hand, as the comfort and counsel of friends are a great counter to fearful conditions. Up until this point, David has acted and been presented impeccably, from his singular and distinctive confrontation with Goliath: *“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46 This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head”* (1 Sam. 17:45-46), to his faithfulness to serve Saul even after being anointed as king, to his covenant friendship with Jonathan, to his turn as a faithful soldier. In evaluating his own life and asking Jonathan to do the same (20:1), he could not find a sin that would have caused such a response from Saul, his father-in-law and king.

But react Saul did! With a combination of anger and jealousy, Saul set out to kill David, either by his own hand in the throwing of spears or by unleashing all of his servants against David (19:1). David went from beloved hero in killing tens of thousands to *persona non grata*, a man without a kingdom, quarter, or refuge. Even Samuel could not help him without the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit (19:18-24),

and now Jonathan was powerless to stop his father's rage. The spiritual condition within Israel had taken on the temperament of their leader, and that left David exposed. It's important to understand that after David received the news from Jonathan to "Hurry! Be quick! Do not stay!", he left everything behind, not packing provision or saying goodbye (except to Jonathan). This was a new experience for David, as it is for most that find themselves in desperation the first time.

Another quick note before we look at the text of chapter 21 itself. Some have titled this chapter "David's folly", and for sure, David's decisions are out of character and given over to fear, but we should ask "why is this chapter recorded?" Clearly, the author of 1 Samuel does not record every incident or event in David's life, so each recording is of high value. Here, we see that the Bible does not put a sheen on character's lives and does not artificially make them look better than they were. David was the best of men but a man at best. We can take some comfort in the fact that David, the anointed of God from whom an eternal covenant would be made and from whom the *Messiah's* kingly line would come, still struggled with things like fear and doubt. But he did not stay there, but rather lifted his gaze up again, like he had done all through his early life, to the instruction of his own soul, his children (Psa. 34:11), and by extension, us this morning.

1 Samuel 21:1-9 records David's first stop on his frightful flight at **Nob**, a place of sanctuary about 2 miles north of Jerusalem and perilously close to Saul. He came to **Ahimelech**, the local priest of whom David had come to in order to inquire of the Lord before (1 Sam. 22:15). But when David knocked on the door, Ahimelech was **trembling** (v. 1), and began to question the reason David showed up. Apparently, the news of David's status had spread and caused unease to anyone who would house a fugitive. Let's look at how David conducted himself the rest of the chapter as he desperately tried to get to a safe place and out of Saul's reach:

- **The rightful king asked for physical provisions from the priest, but did it in a deceptive way** – Not even possessing food to eat, David asked for any bread that might be on hand. The only bread in the house of worship was the **Bread of Presence**, the holy bread that was reserved for the priests alone (Lev. 24:5-9). Every Sabbath twelve loaves of this bread were piled on the table of the holy place in the tabernacle. They were, among other things, a quiet witness that **God sustains** His people and supplies their needs (Exod. 16). In fact, Jesus Himself gave commentary of this incident in **Matt. 12:3-4** when His own disciples were "unlawfully" eating grain of wheat on the Sabbath. Jesus pointed to what David did as "unlawful", and yet he was guiltless, since God desires '*mercy, and not sacrifice*'. What Jesus was saying was that the *intent* of the Law was fulfilled in the act of mercy, not superseded by it. It was right for David to come to the Tabernacle for provision, and it was right for the Priest to provide holy bread for daily bread, since the desire of God is to care for the needs of His people. However, how David got this provision was NOT pure. It is clear that David acted deceptively, lying to Ahimelech as to the reason for his appearance, stating that he was on a top secret mission from Saul, which meant he left so quickly as to not secure food or weapons. Ahimelech, though potentially dubious of the flimsy story, willingly gave David the bread.

There is an interesting verse of note in v. 7, where we are introduced to the lurking character of **Doeg**, a clear loyalist to Saul. Why is he important? There is an argument to be made to say David lied to Ahimelech to give him *plausible deniability* if questioned by Saul later on, to try to protect the priest. However, if that were the reason, he failed miserably. Chapter 22 records the death of Ahimelech by

the hand of Doeg, along with 85 other priests (22:18). David himself knew that the priests' life was in jeopardy when he left, taking on the responsibility of his demise on himself (22:22).

- **The fearless warrior who slayed the giant with a stone needed the comfort of a sword in desperation** – Apparently Goliath's sword was kept at the tabernacle as a kind of trophy and memorial piece, a reminder of God's provision and deliverance. The sword was the ONLY weapon found in the tabernacle, so when David was offered to take it, he said there was none like it. If nothing else, this shows a turn of character from when he first burst on the scene and signals that in desperation he began to *look down at circumstances rather than looking up, trusting his own shrewdness rather than God alone.*

*“This was David’s passage through Nob, which became for him a place where **fear gave way to sin, unbelief, and worldliness.** At Nob, David sought to protect himself with a lie, permitted his behavior to endanger others, and exulted in the worldly weapons he acquired. How much better it would have been if the sight of Goliath’s sword had **reminded** David of how God had earlier answered his faith, and how willing God is to help those who call on his name! Christians today should remember God’s sovereign grace to us in Christ and in this be fortified against **temptation to lie, cheat, or manipulate others when we feel threatened or afraid.**”¹*

- **The faithful king to be was relegated to acting like a madman out of fear** – The next part of the story is full of irony and sadness. We are NOT given much by way of commentary as to motives and reasons, but only *what* actually happened. David fled **Nob** and made his way to Achish, **king of a Philistine city called Gath**. Why did he go there? Perhaps he thought his fugitive status would have given him safe haven, a kind of trophy for the Philistines who could use David as a mercenary or at least for information. Whatever the reason, here comes David, with Goliath's sword in tow (it would have been hard to hide), to Goliath's home town (where his family I'm sure still stung from the memory of his defeat), and sought safety. Instead of open arms, he was detained (“in their hands” – v. 13), since the Philistines had heard the song sung by Israel: “*Saul struck down thousands...and David ten thousands*”, of who? PHILISTINES! It is no wonder they wanted to lock David up and have him pay for what he had done.

It is here that David showed shrewdness and God delivered him, but it came at the cost of acting like a crazy person. If David was told 3 months before that he would act like a madman to get away from his enemy, he would have been appalled. But here was David, clawing at the gate and drooling down his beard, acting **insane before his enemy, the anointed of the LORD relegated to the lowest level of indignity.** He was so good at the act, that the king Achish, almost comically, said he had enough madmen in the city and did not need another one, allowing David to go free. Fear, not faith, drove him at this point, which is not consistent with his character nor the king.

A Desperate Reaction

Before moving to what David learned and taught from this incident in both **Psalm 34 and 56**, it's good to look at a few principles of application to all of us during seasons of desperation. **Fear** is an overall driver in this chapter and the Psalms written from it, and the diametric difference between fearing the Lord and fearing man. The wrong kind of fear can unravel our hearts and minds into all kinds of different

¹ Richard D. Phillips, “*1 Samuel: Reformed Expository Commentary*”, p. 366-67.

challenges and sin: **self-pity, doubt, lack of rational thought, isolation, depression, panic, bitterness, and weariness** to name a few. David indulged in at least some of these. Since improper fear is such a root sin, we must properly diagnose this in order to deal properly with the fruit it produces. In other words, if you are struggling with doubt or bitterness, it very well could be that you are not fearing the Lord consistently, trusting Him completely, and are instead looking **down** at circumstances and worldly means to solve. Though there can be arguments made in terms of when lying would be acceptable (to directly save a life, i.e. *"The Hiding Place"*, or about gifts during Christmastime, your high school S.A.T scores, etc.) anytime we use worldly means without trusting the Lord there will be implications:

1. **Unbelieving or deceptive actions will have real consequences** – We are far too good at justifying ourselves and our sins to play the moral roulette too often. When we lean on worldly means of operation to fulfill fearful motives, there will be consequences downstream. If we fear not having enough money because we don't trust the Lord to provide, thus work longer hours to the neglect of our family in order to bring home a bigger paycheck, or compromise values to get there, we are living out of fear not faith. These actions expose our real motives and intentions. Remember, David's lie helped keep him alive, but it came at the dire consequence of 85 innocent lives. When we disbelieve out of fear, we typically are only focused on **ourselves** and do not consider how our actions will affect the people we say we love around us.
2. **We are ALL prone to acting out of fear, and it can happen far too quickly** – The stories of the OT were written down for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11), and we are reminded that *"let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"* (1 Cor. 10:12). David's life was a reminder that we can move from the mountaintop of radical faith (i.e. Goliath, victories preceding Bathsheba – 2 Sam. 10-11) to yielding to fear all too quickly. Remember, fear can affect all of us differently. Some are more prone to fear over money, but others over reputation, or security, or children, or status, or rejection, etc. This is why we have commands in the NT for the church to make sure we are aware of our propensity for these things: *"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."* (Heb. 3:12-13) This is why we all need true friends and biblical relationships in the church. Buddies and companions do not **love me enough** to exhort me, so I need those who love me enough to call out sin, to perceive drift, and call me to live by faith, not fear.
3. **David reminds us that even the godly, mature, and wise will struggle with doubts, fears, and resentments** – David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), and that did not mean he was perfect. When he was alone and isolated, out of normal rhythms, chased down and despised, even he was prone to fearful reactions. *Does that give us license to do the same thing?* By no means, but it also reminds us that we are weak by nature, thus Jesus instructed us to pray dependently during temptation (Matt. 6:13). We are reminded that **no Christian thrives in isolation or independence**, so we commit ourselves to meeting regularly (Heb. 10:24-25). But it also reminds us that even after we may waver in our faith, giving into fear, there is **forgiveness, restoration, and learning to be had**. In all of David's life, we are reminded that God forgives all our sins, great and small, but we also remember that there is a **greater King than David**. David could NOT save himself, nor was he sufficient in himself to be delivered or to be restored. David's life points to a greater king and deliverer, a **better king, one who overcame the world** (John 16:33), who was tempted in every way, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), who gives us grace as our great sympathizer to our weakness.

But David not only points us to Christ in forgiveness, David shows us a process and pathway out of fear and into faith. We do not have time to walk through all of **Psalm 34 and 56**, but each of these precious Psalms were written after this experience in Gath.

A Hopeful Response

Often the Psalms are not written with a title or context, meaning we are not always privy to the circumstances in which they were written. But both of these Psalms give us precise information.

PSALM 34: OF DAVID, WHEN HE CHANGED HIS BEHAVIOR BEFORE ABIMELECH, SO THAT HE DROVE HIM OUT, AND HE WENT AWAY

PSALM 56: TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE DOVE ON FAR-OFF TEREBINTHS. A MIKTAM OF DAVID, WHEN THE PHILISTINES SEIZED HIM IN GATH.

The reference to Abimelech is a connection to Achish of Gath, since Abimelech is an official title rather than a name. David wrote about his experience and how he remembered and learned to continue to trust our good, holy, and delivering God.

1. David reminded us **fear of the LORD overcomes our fear of man**

Psalms 34:4 - I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all **my fears**.

Psalms 34:8-11 - Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, **fear the LORD**, you his saints, for those **who fear him** have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who **seek the LORD** lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; **I will teach you the fear of the LORD**.

Immaturity is solidified when one fails to learn from failure, and fear of failure keeps so many away from walking by dependent faith. David took what he learned through his experience to not only buoy up his own heart, but to instruct others. God uses our failures to grow us and shape us, like He did Peter through His failure and restoration. David could pen these timeless Psalms NOT because he was perfect, but because he remembered he was not, but served a perfect, holy, glorious LORD.

2. David reminded us **God is a deliverer in the darkest of circumstances and fear**

Psalms 34:17-19 (cf. Ps. 56:8) - **When** the righteous cry for help, **the LORD hears and delivers** them out of all their troubles. **The LORD is near** to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, **but the LORD delivers** him out of them all

In our darkest moments and deepest fears, we need to remember that the LORD hears, is near, and delivers! We are never alone, even in our loneliness. God knows, sees, cares, and guides us through.

3. David showed us **how to combine our FEELINGS with TRUTH**

Psalms 56:3-4 - **When I am afraid**, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; **I shall not be afraid**. What can flesh do to me?

Psalm 56:9b-11 - This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise, **in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.** *What can man do to me?*

Fear is real. It is common. It must be redirected. Notice that David **acknowledged his fear** in verse 3, and when he felt the wrong kind of fear, he decidedly **PUT** his trust in the Lord, reminding his mind and heart of truth and reality: *God is for me, what can man do to me ultimately, and His word will guide and lead me to praise.* This is how we overcome the fear of man and circumstance and move our mind and heart to fear the Lord. We are not driven by **emotion**, nor do we call emotions themselves wrong.

Desperate times will come, and most cannot be avoided. But how we respond matters. God has given us the promise of His presence, access to His listening ear, a better king in Jesus, forgiveness when we fail, and hope of deliverance. The question is: *are we going to walk by faith or fear when they come.* One leads to sin and hard consequences, the other to rest and hope. May we walk by faith in our perfect and loving God in all things, looking up to our Savior who understands and sympathizes with us.