

# Sha'ul Kills the Priests of Nov

## First Samuel 22: 6-23

**DIG:** What is Sha'ul's mental and emotional state? What motivates Doeg the Edomite to testify against Ahimelech? What defense does Ahimelech offer? Who is really guilty for all these deaths? Why do Sha'ul's officials refuse to kill Ahimelech and his whole family? Why don't you think Sha'ul can see what he'd become? What kind of a person did Doeg the Edomite prove to be?

**REFLECT:** When, if ever, have you been consumed with a desire for revenge? What "little sin" have you committed, only to be shocked at its far-reaching consequences? How can you "count the cost" of each temptation? When have you, however unwittingly, caused someone great pain or even harm? How do you make amends? Why do you think scheming leaders usually gather self-interested followers like Doeg, rather than honest men like Ahimelech? The priests Ahimelech and Abiathar showed courage in the face of imminent danger, as did David, in a situation that many people were kissing-up to a cruel leader. What are some ways in which our lives call for courage?

### 1014 BC

We now resume the main story line left at 21:9 (see Av - David at Nov). Sha'ul is taking counsel with his men. Unlike David, Sha'ul as usual has his spear (serving as his scepter) in his hand. The king's opening speech shows how agitated and uneasy he was.

**Sha'ul's Complaint:** Now Sha'ul heard that David and his men had come back into the borders of Y'hudah and had been discovered. And Sha'ul (from the tribe of Benjamin) was seated, spear in hand, under the tamarisk tree on the hill at his palace in Gibeah, with all his military officials standing at his side. He said to them, "Listen, men of Benjamin! Will the son of Jesse give all of you fields and vineyards? No. Will he make all of you commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? Again, no. It is plain from this passage that Sha'ul used his kingship to benefit his own tribe. Once again, this shows a lack of character on his part. Then, sitting at the head of his own "pity-party" he said: **Is that why you have all conspired against me?** This was the ranting of a paranoid madman. **No one tells me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or tells me that my son has incited my servant to lie in wait for me, as he does today**" (First Samuel 22:6-8). Sha'ul had become paranoid of his own son. He even accuses Y'honatan of turning David against him. But that was all Sha'ul's doing and not Y'honatan's. He was living in his own world of terrified illusion.<sup>97</sup>

When **Sha'ul** finished his tirade, there must have been an embarrassed silence among his followers. Awkward! No, **they** did not think **they** would be better off with **David**. No, **they** had not conspired against **Sha'ul**. No, **they** had not withheld information. Rather, **they** had been unaware. **They** had no way to answer **Sha'ul**. As the silence continued, it became even more difficult to break it. The tension grew thick and unresolved. Finally, there was a voice. It was not, however, a **Benjaminite**. It was an outsider, a hired gun . . . an **Edomite**.<sup>98</sup>

**Doeg's Revelation:** But **Doeg** the Edomite, who was standing with **Sha'ul's** officials, said, "I saw the son of **Jesse** come to **Ahimelech** son of **Ahitub** at **Nov**. **Doeg** was an outsider who should have known better than to speak in the midst of a family quarrel. But **Doeg** had news and he was very eager to share it. He filed his intelligence report, which was correct in two out of three items. **Ahimelech** did give **David** provisions and he did give him **Goliath's** sword. But the third element of **Doeg's** statement was a lie. He falsely accused **Ahimelech** of inquiring of **ADONAI** for **David** by means of the **Urim** and the **Thummim** (see my commentary on **Exodus 6b - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**). Then the king sent for the priest **Ahimelech** son of **Ahitub** and all the men of his family, who were the priests at **Nov**, and they all came to the king (**First Samuel 22:9-10**).

**The Slaughter of the Priesthood:** **Doeg's** report fed on the king's own suspicions. **Sha'ul** said: Listen now, son of **Ahitub**. This was only the scornful equivalent of "Son of **Jesse**," demonstrating **Sha'ul's** anger over what **Ahimelech** had supposedly done. "Yes, my lord," he answered. **Ahimelech** appeared not to have been alarmed by the summons of the king. His conscience was clear and he spoke up for **David**, who he had always respected. However, **Sha'ul's** question was in fact an accusation: Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of **Jesse**, giving him bread and a sword and inquiring of **YHVH** for him, so that he has rebelled against me and lies in wait for me, as he does today (**First Samuel 22:11-13**). **Sha'ul** trusted **Doeg's** report in full, no doubt because it contained what he wanted to hear (**Second Timothy 4:3**). The king was losing his mind. If his accusations against **Ahimelech** were true, then **God Himself** would be a co-conspirator.

**Ahimelech** answered the king, "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" (**First Samuel 22:14-15**). This is true because **David** had been deceptive to **Ahimelech** about why he had come to **Nov**.

But to Sha'ul, Ahimelch's statement was the same as a confession of treason. The priest had helped David, his enemy, and he had failed to inform Sha'ul of David's movements. The king said, "You will surely die, Ahimelch, you and your whole family." This is the verdict of a demon-possessed madman (19:9). Even if the high priest had been guilty, which he was not, it was illegal to punish the whole family for the father's crime (Deut 24:16). Then the king ordered his official executioners at his side, "Turn and kill the priests of YHVH, because they too have sided with David. They knew he was fleeing (which was not true, but the executioners didn't know that), yet they did not tell me." But the king's official executioners were unwilling to raise a hand to strike the priests of the LORD. They knew the sentence was unjust and would be a sacrilege if they killed the very priests of God Himself. They were Jews who had that sensitivity. Only an Edomite would carry out such an order. Therefore, the king ordered Doeg, "You turn and strike down the priests."

So Doeg the Edomite, who had no problem doing so, turned and struck them down. A liar and a murderer at heart (John 8:44), Doeg went beyond Sha'ul's orders and went to Nov where he virtually wiped out the entire population as well as the farm animals. That day he killed eighty-five men who wore the white linen ephod. But Sha'ul wasn't satisfied with killing eighty-five priests. He also put to the sword Nov, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep. The wholesale slaughter was not unlike the *cherem* or *utter destruction* of God (Deut. 20:13-16). It was ironic and telling that Sha'ul refused to execute such a massive destruction against the Amalekites (First Samuel 15:9), but now in his decline he would act violently against his own people. Honoring God had no place in his life (First Samuel 22:16-19).<sup>99</sup>

Whenever you see a scheming leader, he will have scheming followers, for we produce after our own kind. These are people who will do anything to gain the leaders approval and receive his rewards, and Doeg was such a man. This was the perfect time for him to use his knowledge to please the king and raise his own stature before the other officers. The fact that he was accusing YHVH's anointed king didn't bother him, or that he lied about what the high priest had said and did. It was no wonder that David despised Doeg and expressed his disgust in the words of Psalm 52 (see Be - [When Doeg the Edomite Had Gone to Sha'ul](#)).<sup>100</sup>

**The Escape of Abiathar:** There is a footnote to this massacre. By in the providence of God, one of the sons of Ahimelech named Abiathar, escaped and fled to join David at Keilah (see Bf - [David Saves Keilah](#)). When David moved from Hereth to Keilah, having a priest with an ephod was a tremendous advantage to David and his fugitive band. The four hundred men had Gad the prophet, Abiathar the priest, and David the king, and they were fighting the battles for YHVH.<sup>101</sup>

He told David that **Sha'ul** had killed all of the priests of the LORD except for him. Then David said to **Abiathar**, "That day, when **Doeg the Edomite** was there, I knew he would be sure to tell **Sha'ul**. In retrospect, **David** can now recall **Doeg**. I am responsible for the death of your whole family. The picture of **David** taking responsibility for what happened is in sharp and intentional contrast to the picture of **Sha'ul**, who was irresponsible to the extreme. **Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too.** **David** promised to keep **Abiathar** safe. If **Sha'ul** sought **Abiathar** it was only to get to **David**. **David** would keep **Abiathar**, even as he kept his own life. **David** became the protector of the priesthood. **They** had a common enemy in **Sha'ul** (**First Samuel 22:20-23**).

This episode gives us a clear picture of the history of the priesthood in **Isra'el**. In **First Samuel 2:31-36** we see that the house of **Eli** would end, that one man from that priestly house would be spared, but his would end in grief, and that a new, and faithful, priestly house would be instituted. How true is **God's** Word! Now here, as the story progressed, **Sha'ul** destroyed the house of **Eli**; **ADONAI** saved one man, **Abiathar**; and a new faithful order of priests, the house of **Zadok**, was fully established (**First Chronicles 29:22**). Later, **Abiathar** would foolishly choose to side with **Adoniyah** when he tried to seize the Kingdom from **Solomon**, **God's** chosen successor (see **EI - Adoniyah Sets Himself Up as King**). And thus his life ended in grief as **King Solomon** executed him.

This chapter concerns the demise of **Sha'ul**, who was then deeply alienated from his own people. **David** is scarcely mentioned. **Sha'ul** had nothing left but raw power. **He** had no divine support, no legitimacy, no **Spirit**, and no charisma. Meanwhile, **David** waited. And **Isra'el** waited with him. Partly they were waiting for **Sha'ul** to die. And partly they were waiting for the Kingdom to come, still promised, but not yet a reality.<sup>102</sup>