

David at Gath

First Samuel 21: 10-15

DIG: Gath was the strongest of the five Philistine cities. It was the birthplace of Goliath? Why then does David go there? Why do you think David wore Goliath's sword? Why does David feel it is necessary to act like a madman? What sort of marks does he make and where does he make them?

REFLECT: When have you turned a situation around from being a passive recipient of the actions of others, to being assertive and prepared to take necessary steps? Are you in that situation now? What are you going to do? When has an "insanity plea" or role-play worked for you? How do you honestly face fear? While you were in the valley of the shadow of death, as you look back on that experience, where was God for you?

1015 BC

These verses are an interruption to the main plot of David's struggle with Sha'ul. They bear witness to the different contracts and elements of support David has developed, to which he can appeal in time of distress. Two important points emerge for the developing characterization of David. First, probably now 25, he is no longer an innocent and unknown shepherd boy. He now is well known, with alliances he can count on, with allegiances he can summon, and with political savvy about his own future. He has important political resources at his disposal. Second, David is no longer a passive recipient of the actions of others, as he has been throughout Chapters 16 through 19. Now he is assertive and prepared to take necessary and bold initiatives. It is a measure of the skill of the narrator that David's character is traced in this way.⁸⁰

David knew that Doeg the Edomite, would inform Sha'ul of his whereabouts, David immediately fled for his life. The chase was on. David feared that he would be safe nowhere in Isra'el, and was therefore driven to take refuge with the Philistines and offer himself for service. After David received Goliath's sword from Ahimelek, David fled from Sha'ul, and throwing all caution to the wind, he went to Achish king of Gath. With a subtle appreciation for humor, the narrator records that David fled twenty-three miles to the enemy city of Gath, Goliath's hometown, wearing the giant's old sword.⁸¹

Perhaps David was going to try to enlist as an unknown soldier in the service of Achish, but things changed as he was immediately recognized. But the servants of Achish said to him, "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Now Sha'ul was the king of the land, but due to his many exploits against the Philistines, they applied this title to David showing him a large measure of respect. **The natural exaggeration of a popular rumor.** Achish no doubt had heard the Israelite gossip. Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances, 'Sha'ul has slain his thousands, and David his ten of thousands' (First Samuel 21:10-11)?" He knew what the women sang, and presumably he knew how the comparison enraged Sha'ul. The narrator builds a compelling case for the inevitability of David's kingship.

David took these words to heart and he understood that they viewed him as the true king, and was very much afraid of Achish, the king of Gath for over forty years. So he pretended to be insane in their presence. In those days, an insane person was considered to be possessed by the gods. And while he was in their hands he acted like a madman (the verb translated he acted like a madman is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe drunkenness as in Jeremiah 25:16), making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva drool down his beard.

Achish had seen enough and said to his servants, "Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me?" Achish probably held the common ancient superstition that harming lunatics brought bad luck. Sarcastically declaring: Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house" (First Sam 21:12-15)? Achish's attempt to place the blame on his servants for David's introduction to his court seems to be an example of the common defense mechanism of anticipating criticism, by turning the blame on others. Hence, David was merely left alone. David's deception of Achish worked, as it would again in Chapters 27 and 29. But this experience in Gath led to the writing of two Psalms: Ax - The Philistines Seized David at Gath and Ay - David Pretended to be Insane Before Abimelek.

He will visit Gath again, but here, he was a lone fugitive with no one he could trust. This was probably his lowest point. But although he was in the valley of the shadow of death he discovered that ADONAI was with him, enabling him to devise plans and survive danger.