

Receiving What God Wants to Give

1 Samuel 21-22

What would you write down if we gave you a sheet of paper and asked you to answer the question, “What you expect to receive from God here today?” In other words, what are your expectations about what you might receive from God as you enter into His presence? I suspect we’d have a wide variety of answers.

- “I haven’t come here today to get anything from God. I’ve come here today to give God something – my praise and worship.”
- “I really expect God to comfort my heart. Things have been tough lately and I need to know that God cares.”
- “I honestly have no expectations of what I might receive. I just came to church because it’s Sunday, and this is what I do on Sundays.”
- “This is my first weekend away at college, and I wanted to be able to call home this afternoon and tell my mom that I went to church on my own.”

Our expectations probably differ wildly here this morning.

Scripture suggests that when we enter into God’s presence – whether in times of corporate worship or in private devotions – ***we should both give to God and we receive from God***. Both giving and receiving are vital. When we come into God’s presence, we give Him thanksgiving and praise; we give God tithes and offerings as an expression of our love for Him; ultimately we are supposed to give Him ourselves as “living and holy sacrifices” (Hebrews 12:2).

But we also enter into God’s presence in light of what we might receive from Him. The Bible makes clear that God loves to give to those who enter God’s presence humbly and expectantly. He doesn’t always give us what we want, but He does give us what we need.

Today we are going to consider a couple of passages that emphasize what God wants us to receive when we enter His presence. 1 Samuel 21:1-9 describes how David entered the holy place and received some very tangible help. It’s a rather straightforward account that on the surface doesn’t seem to have anything to do with what God wants to give us when we come into His presence. But 900 years later, Jesus pointed back to this very incident as illustrating what we should expect to receive when we enter into God’s presence. Whether you come here today with no expectations or great expectations, you will find strong encouragement from what Jesus says.

We are four weeks into a sermon series on the life of David. Beginning in 1 Samuel 21 we have fifteen incidents in which David was “on the run”; he is running from King Saul who is trying to kill him. David basically spends his 20s as a fugitive, living in the wilderness, in caves, with the Philistines, etc. A growing number of young men travel with David and go to battle with him. Not everything we will learn about David will be exemplary; at times he won’t seem like “a man after God’s own heart.” As a matter of fact, David’s sins and weaknesses will be put on full display. These accounts will highlight God’s grace and mercy and patience toward David just as much as they will highlight David’s virtues. David is not some idealized character who seems perfect. He is the type of man to whom we can all relate.

David in “the House of God” (1 Samuel 21:1-9)

We read in verse 1 that David and his men came to the city of Nob which was home to 85 priests (22:18). It’s possible that Nob was the location of the actual tabernacle; or perhaps it was simply one of the many holy places that had been established in Israel. Notice the interaction between David and one of these priests, Ahimelech:

1 Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, "Why are you alone and no one with you?"

Ahimelech was apparently aware of David’s reputation as a great warrior, and something about David’s arrival filled him with fear. David calms Ahimelech’s fears by inventing a story about being on a mission for King Saul.

2 And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has commissioned me with a matter, and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'

David flat out lies to Ahimelech. David makes Ahimelech think that Saul has sent him on a secret mission and that the young men travelling with him were staying elsewhere. David’s lie will have dire consequences for Ahimelech and the other priests in Nob because Saul will think that they have willingly conspired to help David and his men (see 22:13). David next asks for something to eat.

3 "Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found." 4 And the priest answered David and said, "There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women."

This “consecrated bread” was the “bread of the Presence” that was kept in the sanctuary. The Law stipulated that only the priests were permitted to eat this bread and that it must be eaten in the holy place (Leviticus 24:5-9). Ahimelech is making an exception by permitting David and his men to eat this bread. Ahimelech only wanted some assurance that David’s men were worthy. The main thing he wanted to know was whether the young men had “kept themselves from women” – which would signify that they were ceremonially clean.

5 And David answered the priest and said to him, "Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?"

“Vessels” is probably a reference to their bodies. David assures Ahimelech that they were holy/clean when they set out on an ordinary journey; on this special mission from Saul, they are certainly still holy.

6 So the priest gave him consecrated bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away.

Even though it technically violated the Law, the priest showed compassion on David and his men by giving them bread.¹ In verse 7 we learn that a man named Doeg was in the temple, observing everything that was happening.

7 Now one of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD; and his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds.

It's likely that Doeg was captured by Saul's army in one of their wars against Edom and pressed into service (see 1 Samuel 14:47). We're not told why, but Doeg was "detained before the Lord": he was under obligation to remain at the holy place for a period of time. In chapter 22 we will learn that Doeg's time in God's presence didn't soften his heart; he would turn out to be a treacherous and brutal man. Not everyone who enters God's presence is changed.

Having received food, David next asks about weapons.

8 And David said to Ahimelech, "Now is there not a spear or a sword on hand? For I brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's matter was urgent."

David gives Ahimelech the impression that Saul had sent him out so quickly that he didn't have time to take weapons. And so he inquires whether or not there is an extra sword or spear on hand (probably knowing full well that there was).

9 Then the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah, behold, it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod; if you would take it for yourself, take it. For there is no other except it here." And David said, "There is none like it; give it to me."

Originally David took Goliath's sword back to his own tent, but now (due to circumstances unknown to us) the sword was being kept in a cloth in the tabernacle. When Ahimelech gives David permission to take it, David said, "There is none like it, give it to me." David was no longer going to battle with stones and a sling. Since he was now fighting with the same weapons as everyone else, he wanted the best available. David said, "Give it to me."

Eugene Peterson points out that "David came to the holy place hungry and defenseless; he left full and equipped" (p. 64). Even though David had been deceitful to Ahimelech throughout, we get the clear implication that the bread and the sword were God's provision and God's protection for David. Aren't you glad that you don't have to be sinless in order to receive from the Lord? David entered the sanctuary hungry and defenseless; he left full and equipped.

A very dark turn of events is described in chapter 22. These events reveal how Saul viewed the tabernacle and the priesthood. He had no respect for the God-given role of the tabernacle or the priests. They were merely one more thing to be manipulated and used for personal gain.

When Saul finds out that David had been at Nob (which was just 2.5 miles from Saul's palace at Gibeah), he is enraged and accuses everyone – including his son Jonathan – of conspiring against him. When Doeg the Edomite hears Saul's tirade, he senses an opportunity. He steps forward and tells Saul everything he had seen at the tabernacle in Nob. He implies that Ahimelech had consciously conspired with David. Even though Ahimelech explained that he thought David was on an urgent mission from Saul, Saul pronounces a death sentence against Ahimelech and everyone in his household. Saul commands his guards to turn around and slaughter them, but they refused to kill the priests of the Lord. And so Saul turns to Doeg:

18 Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn around and attack the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned around and attacked the priests, and he killed that day eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. 19 And he struck Nob the city of the priests with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and infants; also oxen, donkeys, and sheep, he struck with the edge of the sword.

Since the priests didn't serve his own political purposes, Saul had them slaughtered. He could care less that the tabernacle was supposed a place where people could meet with God and find nourishment for their souls – and if needed food and weapons. Saul (and Doeg) couldn't be farther from the heart of God when it came to the true reasons for entering into the presence of God. (Read Psalm 52 for David's lament after learning of Doeg's massacre.)

Jesus' Commentary on David in the House of God (Matthew 12:1-8)

Significantly, when Jesus found Himself in dispute with the Pharisees over the Sabbath, He points back to this very incident of David in the tabernacle. This incident with David illustrated God's eagerness to give to those who enter into His presence.

1 At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath."

When the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of doing "what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath," they aren't pointing back to the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). They were pointing to their own list of detailed regulations that they'd generated in addition to the Hebrew Scriptures. And "picking grain" – even by hand – was one of thirty-nine types of work forbidden on the Sabbath (see Carson, *Matthew*, p. 280).

3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; 4 how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?"

Jesus points out that someone as prominent as David also did something that they would consider to be unlawful. David and his companions ate the consecrated bread that only priests could eat lawfully. They weren't condemned for eating it; and Ahimelech wasn't condemned for giving it to them. The analogy is clear: since the Pharisees wouldn't condemn David for eating the bread of the presence, they shouldn't condemn His disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Jesus gives another example:

5 "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? 6 "But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here.

Jesus' point is that if the Pharisees are fine with priests doing their God-ordained work on the Sabbath, they should be more than fine with Him and His disciples doing the work of picking grain on the Sabbath because *something greater than the temple is here*.² Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple, the culmination of everything the temple signified.

7 "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

God didn't lose any sleep over Ahimelech giving David bread that only the priests were permitted to eat; He was glad that he erred on the side of compassion. And God didn't lose any sleep over Jesus' disciples picking grain on the Sabbath; He was glad Jesus erred on the side of compassion (they were hungry!). When it comes to the tabernacle or the Sabbath or any other spiritual structure, what really matters is compassion. The heart of it all was God's compassion. All of the spiritual structures of the old covenant (the temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood, the Sabbath, etc.) were all God-given means of receiving compassion.

In saying, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," Jesus was making clear that the Pharisees man-made regulations were trivial because He Himself had authority over all things Sabbath.

In David's day, Saul viewed the priesthood and the tabernacle as tools to use for his own purposes. They were one more thing he tried to use to control and manipulate the political situation in Israel. In Jesus' day the Pharisees did the same thing. They used the Law and the temple to control and manipulate people. But Jesus made clear that it has all always been about compassion. The priesthood and the sacrificial system and the temple itself were always about compassion. Hungry, defenseless people could show up empty-handed and leave full and equipped.

If that was true in the old covenant, *how much more* should people expect to experience compassion through spiritual structures in the new covenant! In light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, can there be any doubt that God wants us to receive compassion when we enter His presence!?!

In every generation you will find people in spiritual leadership that think like Saul/Doeg and like the Pharisees in Jesus' day when it comes to spiritual structures. In our day you will find churches that use the Bible and church structures to manipulate and control people. Sadly,

spiritual abuse by churches is quite common in our day. I've heard stories about this that would break your heart.

David's experience and Jesus' comments suggest that church leadership should be marked by compassion, not control. Elders and deacons and pastors should be motivated by compassion because people come to church hungry and vulnerable. We don't get everything right here at Faith, but I can assure you that the leadership here at Faith (elders, deacons, ministry leaders) want to see you experience the life-changing compassion of God through the structures of this church. And the vast majority of churches in this town would say the same thing.

We have no desire to control and manipulate people for personal gain or ambition; we really don't have the time or energy for that. We want you to receive as much compassion as you possibly can through the spiritual structures of this church (corporate worship, our Life Groups, and through the practice of personal spiritual disciplines). God longs to show you as much compassion as you will receive.

Here's the question, though: ***Are you eager to receive the compassion that God is eager to give?*** God longs to show you compassion here this morning. The only prerequisite is a willingness to receive it. You have to admit, "I'm just like David; I come here hungry and vulnerable. God, I need you to feed me."

Are you willing to admit that you're hungry and defenseless? Some of you come here today are just tired – weary, burdened down by situations that don't have easy solutions. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Some of you might be full of guilt over some sin or some failure. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Some of you may be spiritually starved; you've been filling yourself up with things that don't satisfy you and you need some solid spiritual nourishment. God loves to fill us up with things that satisfy.

In our response time, admit to God that you come here today needy. Ask Him for the willingness to receive whatever He wants to give you.

NOTES:

¹ The comment in verse 6 that the bread of the Presence was being replaced by "hot bread" suggests that this incident took place on the Sabbath because that's when new bread was brought to the tabernacle. If this is indeed the case, it adds heightened significance when Jesus makes reference to this passage (because He was sparring with the Pharisees over the Sabbath).

² If the Pharisees were going to be consistent, they have to conclude that the priests in the temple break the Sabbath since they do "work" by offering sacrifices and changing the bread and lighting candles. In reality, of course, they are innocent because the Law itself commands them to do this work on the Sabbath. The Pharisees would have said, "Of course they're innocent because temple worship brings honor to God."