

1 Samuel 21:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the priest answered David, and said, There is no common bread under mine hand, but there is hallowed bread; if the young men have kept themselves at least from women.

Analysis

And the priest answered David, and said, There is no common bread under mine hand, but there is hallowed bread; if the young men have kept themselves at least from women.

Ahimelech's response introduces a profound tension between ritual law and human necessity. The Hebrew 'lechem chol' (common bread) versus 'lechem qodesh' (holy bread) distinguishes ordinary food from the showbread reserved for priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). The condition regarding ceremonial purity reflects Leviticus 15's regulations about sexual activity and cleanness. This incident became the basis for Jesus's teaching about the Sabbath in Mark 2:25-26, demonstrating that ceremonial law serves human welfare rather than being an end in itself. Ahimelech's pastoral flexibility reveals a priest who understood the spirit behind the letter of the law.

Historical Context

The showbread (lechem panim, 'bread of the face/presence') consisted of twelve loaves placed weekly on the golden table in the Holy Place. Only priests could normally eat this bread, and only after it was replaced with fresh loaves on the Sabbath.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How do you distinguish between God's unchanging moral law and ceremonial regulations?
2. When have you seen rigid religious observance conflict with genuine human need?

Interlinear Text

וַיַּעַן	וְהַכֹּהֵן	אֶת	דָּוִד	וַיֹּאמֶר	אֵין	לֶחֶם
answered	And the priest		David	and said		bread
H6030	H3548	H853	H1732	H559	H369	H3899
חֵל	אֶל	תַּחַת	יָדִי	כִּי	אִם	לֶחֶם
There is no common			under mine hand			bread
H2455	H413	H8478	H3027	H3588	H518	H3899
קֹדֶשׁ	וְשֵׁ	אִם	נִשְׁמְרוּ	הַנְּעָרִים	אֶךְ	
hallowed	but there is		have kept	if the young men	themselves at least	
H6944	H3426	H518	H8104	H5288	H389	
מֵאִשָּׁה:						
from women						
H802						

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 19:15 (Parallel theme): And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives.

Exodus 25:30 (Parallel theme): And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before me alway.

1 Corinthians 7:5 (Parallel theme): Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.

Zechariah 7:3 (Parallel theme): And to speak unto the priests which were in the house of the LORD of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?

1 Samuel 21:6 (Parallel theme): So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away.