

First Samuel contains several instances of lying and deceit on the part of God's chosen servant David and of Samuel the prophet ([1 Sam. 16; 20; 21; 27](#)). Did the Lord really condone lying and deceit as means to a good end?

In dealing with this difficult question, we must keep the following factors in view.

1. Even though Scripture records the dishonesty of men, this does not necessarily mean that it approves or condones such a sin. The same is true of other types of sin committed by religious leaders.

- [We have seen this with how God used Tamar to bring to light the sin of Judah](#)
- [Or how Jehu was used to punish the Baal worshippers, and yet his massacre led to his family being cursed](#)
- Or how God allows people to be deceived as punishment in [2 Thessalonians 2:11](#)

2. The duty to tell only what is true does not necessarily carry with it the obligation to tell the whole truth about the matter, especially if lives would be endangered or lost as a result of this information, or if divulging all the details would violate a trust of secrecy or amount to a betrayal of another's confidence.

- Examples include: not telling a Nazi where you hid the Jews
- [Not letting Hebrew boys be murdered by Pharaoh](#)

3. The mere recording of an episode involving subterfuge or deception does not imply that the person resorting to it was acting responsibly on the highest level of faith or furnishing a valid example of conduct that believers might justifiably follow today.

Another thing to keep in mind is how Jesus plainly instructs his disciples for "biblical evangelism", [including the early Christian church and how they died for their faith.](#)

With these factors in mind, we may profitably examine each of the episodes alluded to in the question.

[1 Samuel 16:2](#) relates Samuel's apprehension at carrying out the Lord's assignment to anoint a new king down in Bethlehem. "But Samuel said, 'How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD' " (NASB). Verse 5 relates that Samuel said to Jesse and his family, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD" (NASB).

Of course this was in fact true, for he had followed God's instructions in this matter. He had actually taken along a heifer to offer on the altar in Bethlehem, even though he really had a further purpose in mind. In this entire transaction he was carrying out the instructions of God Himself.

It is quite clear that the Lord had approved a policy of withholding information from King Saul that would have moved him to violence or bloodshed had he known of it in advance. If Samuel had divulged his full intention (beyond the performing of a religious sacrifice in Bethlehem), Saul

would have killed not only Samuel himself but also David and his entire family. In this case then, it would have been altogether wrong and extremely harmful for Samuel to have told the entire truth or revealed his entire purpose.

There is a clear distinction between resorting to actual deceit and to withholding information that would result in great harm and even failure to obey carrying out the will of God—in this case the anointing of young David to be king over Israel. In other words, Samuel was entirely within the will of God when he told only part of the truth rather than the whole truth.

[1 Samuel 20](#) relates how Jonathan handled the difficult matter of protecting the life of his dearest friend, David, in a situation where he knew:

1. that God had chosen David to be the next king of Israel and
2. that his own father, Saul, was likely to attempt to prevent this purpose of God by having David killed, as a dangerous rival to the dynastic rights of the house of Saul.

His loyalty to his father represented a definite conflict with his duty to the Lord Himself and to His chosen servant, David, whom he personally loved far more than himself or his insanely jealous and bloodthirsty father.

Under these peculiar circumstances, Jonathan could pursue no other course than he did. That is to say, he agreed with David on a test of Saul's true intentions (which were difficult to determine, in view of his unbalanced mentality and his occasional change of mind; cf. 1 Sam. 19:6). The only way he could find out the king's real purpose was to present him with a situation to react to, namely David's failure to show up at the new moon feast at Saul's palace (which David had previously attended without fail, as a son-in-law belonging to the royal family). There had to be some plausible excuse arranged for his absence; so this was furnished by David's alleged summons to Bethlehem in order to join with the rest of his family in celebrating the new moon festival in the household of Jesse.

Unlike the previous example ([1 Sam. 16:2](#)), there seems to have been no such summons from David's oldest brother, Eliab, even though such an invitation would have been quite reasonable and justified on the part of the family in Bethlehem. Yet as the story unfolds, it is quite clear that David never went to Bethlehem after he found out that Saul was bent on having him killed.

It is highly doubtful whether David would have gone home even if he had learned from Jonathan that Saul had relented in his hostility; David probably would have made his way back to the palace, instead. We can only conclude that this appointment to join the family in Bethlehem was a sheer concoction on David's part. And even though Jonathan accurately repeated what David had said to him by way of a request to be excused from attending the king's table, Jonathan, of course, knew that it was a mere subterfuge. And yet we can hardly fault Jonathan in this, for had he told his father all that he knew about the matter and the full content of his conversation with David, he would have been guilty of the basest betrayal of his trusting friend, who was also the chosen king of Israel according to Yahweh's own decision.

David's blood would have been on Jonathan's head. As it was, he nearly lost his own life as he tried to defend David's rights before his father's fury; and Jonathan had to beat a hasty retreat when Saul attempted to pin him against the wall with his spear ([1 Sam. 20:33](#)).

[1 Samuel 21](#) records the sorry choice David made in fleeing to the town of Nob, where the high priest, Ahimelech, served at the tabernacle of the Lord. David should never have brought that community into such terrible danger from the wrath of the king, and his brief visit there brought on him the guilt of their subsequent massacre at the hands of Saul's agents, under the leadership of the despicable Doeg ([22:18–19](#)).

In fairness to David, it may well be that he did not foresee the extreme to which Saul would go in slaughtering all those innocent priests. But after the atrocity was accomplished and Abiathar brought him the sorrowful tidings, David had to acknowledge how inexcusably guilty he was when he lied to Ahimelech about his mission at Nob and gave the priest no opportunity to choose whether he was willing to court death for David's sake.

In this entire episode David involved himself in the greatest guilt—as he himself recognized afterward. “Then David said to Abiathar, ‘I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have brought about the death of every person in your father's household’ ” ([1 Sam. 22:22](#), NASB).

But as for the Lord's involvement in this entire tragedy, there is really no indication whatever that He condoned David's deception toward Ahimelech. The only mitigation of David's guilt was that he really had not thought ahead about what harm he was going to cause to others when he sought refuge at Nob. But, in retrospect, David should have turned in some other direction when he fled from Saul.

If David had really looked to the Lord for guidance, he might have found safety at Engedi or some other remote wilderness to which he later resorted. He certainly was out of the will of God when he lied his way into Nob and made off with the sword of Goliath.

It is interesting to notice that Jesus later used David's example at Nob, where he and his followers partook of the week-old showbread when they were starving, even though that bread was intended for the priests alone ([Matt. 12:3–4](#)). Our Lord seems to imply that under those unusual circumstances, David was justified in doing that, since the preservation of human life was even more important than strict observance of the ritual law.

But even so, David certainly suffered the deepest humiliation when he allowed panic to lead him to King Achish at Gath, instead of waiting on the Lord for His guidance. David only succeeded in putting his life into even greater danger when he sought refuge with the ungodly Philistines. He only escaped from that peril by pretending to be hopelessly demented while he was in the palace of Achish, with the result that they utterly despised him and drove him from their borders like some wild animal ([1 Sam. 21:13–15](#)).

In [1 Samuel 27:8–12](#) we read of a long-continued deception David practiced toward King Achish. After he had been allowed to set up his headquarters in Ziklag (as a vassal or ally of Achish of Gath), David supported himself and his six hundred followers by raiding the tribesmen of the Negeb (the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites) and slaughtering the entire population of every community that he invaded.

The purpose of this bloody practice was to keep any survivors from informing the Philistines at Gath that David was not really attacking the Jerahmeelites and Judeans, as he claimed he was doing, but was actually raiding non-Israelite communities that were on good terms with the Philistines ([vv. 11–12](#)). He managed to keep Achish from ever finding out the truth about his activities and made him believe that he had become an enemy of his own countrymen by preying on their villages and carrying off their livestock.

After this review of those sorry episodes in the early career of David, we must recognize that God did not favor and protect the son of Jesse on account of his occasional deceptions or his occasional hardness toward pagan enemies (like the Ammonites in [2 Sam. 12:31](#)).

On the contrary, God put David through an arduous educative process of suffering, uncertainty, and danger, because He found in him an instrument well suited to deliver his nation from their heathen foes and to establish a strong and stable government in fulfillment of His ancient promise to Abraham ([Gen. 15:18–21](#)).

It was not because of his virtue and his good deeds that God chose David for his role of leadership but because of his great faith. Despite the episodes where he failed to trust the Lord completely or to seek His guidance as carefully as he should have, David gave his heart to the Lord sincerely and made it his chief purpose and desire to do the will of God and glorify His name

Gleason L. Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Zondervan's Understand the Bible Reference Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 175–178.