
March 22 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 30-31

SUMMARY

As we read yesterday, a tremendous storm is brewing over Israel. The Philistines are on the march against Israel. King Saul and the Israelites are making their countermove. Chapter 29 ends with the Philistines on the march to battle King Saul and the Israelite forces in the Jezreel Valley. Make an online map search for "Jezreel Valley Mount Gilboa" or "Saul's last battle." If you're looking at a map of David's day, the Philistines march from the Gaza strip, north along the Via Maris, up to what's known in Jesus' day as Caesarea. The trade route then turns northeast, and the Philistines march to Megiddo. The city of Megiddo guards the pass into the Jezreel Valley, Israel's very productive farmland. From Megiddo, the Philistine army would turn southeast to follow the valley toward the town of Beth She'an on the east. In this area, King Saul and the Israelites will make their stand.

But first, we shift back to David. He and his men have left Ziklag to join forces with the Philistine leader Achish. The Philistine leaders aren't so keen to have a renowned Philistine-killer leading experienced crack troops in their midst. Reluctantly, Achish sends David and his men back to Ziklag to wait out the war with their families and possessions. While David puts on a disappointed face, he's happy because his choice to find refuge from Saul with the Philistines almost had him battling the very people he was anointed to one day rule. Whew!

But when David and the army reach Ziklag, they're shocked. Amalekite warriors attacked the town and took everything with them – the women, children, and livestock (30:1-2). The good news we read is that no one was killed. But do David and his warriors know that? Well, there are no bodies there. But who knows what they find later?

This moment is a time of crushing despair for David and the D-Team. Commander David is not only grieving for his wives and children, but ugly talk is brewing, "the troops talked about stoning him, for they were all very bitter over the loss of their sons and daughters..." (30:6). As a "storm" was about to break over Saul and the rest of Israel, David was already in a hurricane of trouble. But as we know, there's an eye in every hurricane. It's that strange place where peace reigns, although catastrophic winds scream at the storm's periphery. In this moment of despair and threat, David finds the storm's center, "But David found strength in the Lord his God" (30:6). How? It doesn't take much guessing. David had often faced calamity, and every time, the Lord coordinated plans and events to help "his man" out. He helped David make the right decisions and protected him from wrong ones because David had his destiny from Yehovah to fulfill.

Sometimes the only thing we can hold onto while we regroup is the Lord and how He's delivered us in the past.

David goes to the source. He asks the Lord, "Should I pursue these raiders? Will I overtake them?" The Lord answers that David will win the fight and recover everyone and everything! Based on the Lord's sure word, David takes off after the Amalekites. When he and his men reach Besor Brook, David leaves two hundred men there. It's easy to figure out why. David's army had traveled about 80 miles in the past three days, and now they have to run after the Amalekites, who already had a head-start. The exhausted soldiers remain at the brook while David's strike force tracks the Amalekites.

Along the way, David and his men find an Amalekite slave from Egypt, dying of hunger and thirst. They revive him with water and fruit sugar, and his intelligence is crucial to letting David and his army know they were homing in on the raiders. When the D-Team reaches the Amalekites, the raiders are celebrating, utterly unaware of the destruction that will soon fall on them. David's men strike, and only four hundred Amalekites escape on camels (30:17).

David, his men, their families, and booty make it back to the Besor Brook. David's stock, previously in the tank, now skyrockets! But when the victorious army greets the left-behind group, some of the army's evil men and trouble makers are greedy to keep the extra gain. Their excuse was, "We did the work, we get the extra spoils. Let 'em have their possessions and take off" (30:22). What was David's response? He knew that the rescue and the extra spoils came from the Lord. Therefore, the extra stuff belonged to the whole group, appropriately divided. From this, David sets a principle for the future: Those who support shall be as those who fight. All share in the bounty together. This example becomes law in Israel (gee, kind of like a royal decree?).

Not only does David do right by his men, but he makes a very diplomatic move. He sends plunder to his fellow tribe members and leaders in Judah (30:26). This gift was both generous and smart. David generously paid back those who had given him safe havens during his flight from Saul, and this no doubt solidified their support.

Even though this was an extremely harrowing event for David, it had a benefit. David was now away from the battle that would take Saul's life. Once again, the Lord prevented David from making a mistake (see Nabal and Abigail). When God leads you, He helps you dodge many bullets, some of them even fired from your own gun! Furthermore, David was even continuing the Lord's fight against the Amalekites.

As we turn to chapter 31, the storm breaks over Saul. The text reads quickly and ferociously, just like the battle action. Israel's army dissolves before the Philistines, and many warriors die on Mt. Gilboa. It's a total rout. Stripped of his protection, the Philistines pursue Saul. The king's sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malki-shua, die. Only Saul's son Ish-Bosheth (Esh-Baal, 1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39) survives.

The battle presses close to Saul as the Israelite army continues to collapse. The archers get close enough to hit Saul. Faced with certain death, Saul opts to take his own life rather than let the vicious Philistines torture, humiliate, and degrade him (31:4). Like David, Saul's armorbearer won't touch the Lord's anointed, but Saul will. Saul sets his sword hilt against the ground and leans down upon it, killing himself. Saul's armorbearer does the same. So King Saul's reign ends according to the Lord's word through Samuel the night before.

Without Saul and the army, the Israelites in the Jordan valley and those on the east bank of the Jordan flee their towns and head for the hills. Naturally, the Philistines became the occupying force. As the Philistines arrive to plunder their enemy, they find Saul's body. So, why did the Philistines take his head and his armor? Perhaps as revenge for what David did to their Philistine champion, Goliath. Another reason might have been that a whole body is tough to cart around when proclaiming your triumph over the enemy. The Philistines used this gruesome parade to demonstrate their victory. As they did with the Ark of the Covenant when they captured it, the Philistines put Saul's armor in their gods' temple to honor their gods. They take what's left of Saul's body and hang it on the wall of Beth She'an.

Since I've been to Israel and that exact location, I understand why they did this. At Saul's death, the city was elevated on a massive hill called a Tel. When a town is built, destroyed, and rebuilt, the ground rises over the rubble. Over time, repeated rebuilding creates a very large mound. Look for pictures of Beth She'an online. The city you'll see on the site today is a restored Roman city, but the *hill* behind it is where Beth She'an was in Saul's day. The city is located at the east end of the Jezreel Valley, near the Jordan River valley, where trade traffic would pass by. With all this in mind, you're right. Hanging Saul's and his sons' bodies on the wall was a gruesome display to tell all who pass by precisely who was in charge – the Philistines.

However, courageous residents of Jabesh-Gilead launch a nighttime guerilla operation to snatch Saul's and his sons' remains for an honorable burial. After all, Saul began his kingship by bringing deliverance to those same residents, and their act of devotion showed he was still king in their eyes!

And so we leave 1 Samuel with the land of Israel was in upheaval and the Philistines controlling the country's mid-section.

INSIGHT

According to Judaism, the greatest charity one can extend is mercy toward the dead because they can never pay you back. The Torah also states that even criminals deserve a proper burial because they've already been punished. Therefore, a capital punishment victim must be buried on the same day as their execution (as noted earlier).

King Saul started so well but ended sadly. Looking back on 1 Samuel, we can see that our desires often drive us ahead or away from God's will, guidance, and help. We can also see that staying true to the Lord's word is one of the essential things for us if we're to live a life pleasing to the Lord.

March 23 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 1-3

SUMMARY

2 Samuel continues the account of Israel's developing monarchy. Saul has died at the end of 1 Samuel, and now David is poised to ascend Israel's throne, but his ascent and reign won't be easy. Throughout the book, we'll get an up-close and personal look at David, the man after God's own heart, and we won't always like what we see.

What can we learn from David and 2 Samuel? We often see our Bible heroes as sinless, glorious examples of faith and say we can't ever reach such heights. The Lord begs to differ. He doesn't whitewash even his most shining examples. We see them with all their glories and faults and see that the Lord's love and mercy extend to all who will take hold of His grace, forgiveness, and strength.

2 Samuel is about God's rule over His people and His king. The book is more than just an account of a king's reign, but an accounting of a king's reign from a spiritual perspective. It displays David's trust in the Lord and reliance on His support and guidance, even amid revealed sin and family tragedies. Repentance, grace, and mercy are significant themes in 2 Samuel and constantly weave their way through the various events. The grace and mercy David experienced from the Lord, he extended to those around him, often to their dismay or amazement.

We'll be introduced to many characters when we launch into this book. I'll try to relate them to one another to make it easier to track family and tribal dynamics that are driving forces in the narrative. Here is a starting point:

- Zeruah is David's sister and the mother of Joab, Abishai, Asahel.
- Joab is David's nephew and his army commander.
- Abishai and Asahel are David's nephews and Joab's brothers.
- Abner is Saul's 1st cousin and his former army commander. Yes, there will be a conflict between Abner and Joab!
- Ish-Bosheth is Saul's son.
- Michal is David's first wife.

Chapter 1 could be titled, "When good news is bad news." The scene picks up with David and his D-Team at Ziklag, two days after the battle on Mt. Gilboa, where Saul has died. A young man shows up in David's camp with news that Saul and his sons are dead (1:4). When asked how he knows that, the young man reveals he's an Amalekite who was with

the Israelites, likely an enslaved person. As Saul's death drew near, the Amalekite says King Saul requested the Amalekite to help kill him. So, in obedience to the king, the young man says he obliged Saul and took his crown and armband to bring to David.

If you're reading closely, you'll notice the previous account says it was Saul's armorbearer whom he requested to do the deed. The armorbearer refused, so Saul took his own life. So what's with the Amalekite's story? Likely, he was kissing up to David, a mighty Israelite commander who was probably Israel's next king. As an Amalekite, the slave knew his people weren't popular with the Israelites. Perhaps he could win favor or get another perk for appearing to clear David's way to the throne? No, not so much. First, he didn't know what his compatriots had just done to David, his family, his men, and their families. Secondly, he completely misjudges David. The future king is keenly aware that no one may touch the Lord's anointed, even if the Lord's anointing has departed from him. David understands that Saul's life was in the Lord's hand alone. In short, the Amalekite, thinking he had won David's favor, earned an execution.

But for now, David and his men grieve deeply "for those who died by the sword—for Saul, his son Jonathan, the Lord's people, and the house of Israel" (1:12). After a day of fasting and grieving, David executes the Amalekite for his presumption (1:16) even though Saul lay dying from his suicidal wound.

What follows is a beautifully touching lament for Saul and Jonathan from the man who would become known as the Sweet Psalmist of Israel.

1:19 is the Introduction. David praises Saul and Jonathan, and 1:20 says not to speak of their deaths lest the enemy rejoices over Israel's tragedy. In 1:21, David "curses" the place where Saul and Jonathan fell in battle as a place of military defeat. And what is the reason to declare Saul's shield as cast away and not anointed with oil? Shields were usually rubbed with oil to protect and preserve them. Leather shields were oiled to help arrows and spears glance off the surface. Throwing shields away and not rubbing with oil meant that they were useless to the fallen commander.

David praises Saul and Jonathan in 1:22-23. Even though death was nearly upon them, Saul and Jonathan fought on together. The metaphors of eagles and lions paint the picture of speed and strength. David sings of the "daughters of Israel." This idiom refers to the nation's cities, towns, and villages to which Saul brought peace and prosperity under his reign. This phrase clarifies the "daughters" of the Philistines, meaning "Don't tell of Saul's death lest the Philistine cities here of it and celebrate in the streets." David again uses the phrase, "How the mighty have fallen" in 1:25-26, but in this case, it focuses on

David's best covenant friend, Jonathan. While some people have tried to use David's language to imply an inappropriate Torah-breaking relationship between the two men, David honestly uses the expression of a woman's love to denote the depth of Jonathan's love and loyalty to David. Verse 1:27 is the Grand Finale. This instance is the third time "How the mighty have fallen" is recited, and the "weapons of war" are Saul and Jonathan because swords don't die in battle. People do.

Chapter 2 opens with a kingless, defeated, and oppressed Israel. Once again, David leans on the Lord's guidance about what to do. David knows he was anointed to be Israel's king after Saul, and now that Saul is dead, it must be his time to become king. But how to become king is a tricky matter in a tribal society. The Lord tells David to start with his tribe, Judah. Judah's main town is Hebron, so that's where the Lord sends him (2:1). There, the leaders of Judah coronate David as king. When the new king hears what the brave men of Jabesh-Gilead did out of kindness to Saul, David recognizes and blesses them. There's also a subtle purpose included in his praise, "Therefore, be strong and valiant, for though *Saul your lord is dead, the house of Judah has anointed me king over them*" (2:7).

However, the kingship isn't settled with some people (okay, many) in Israel. Abner, Saul's 1st cousin, does the customary thing. He finds Saul's surviving son, Ish-Bosheth, and makes him king over "all" Israel, all the tribes but Judah over whom David reigns. Yes, the stage is set for a Battle Royale!

The top commanders of both sides agree to a meeting at the pool of Gibeon (1:13) in central Israel. Initially, this was to be short and simple "context" to spare a civil war and greater bloodshed. The civil war erupts when all 24 combatants die simultaneously (1:15-16). Joab's brother, Asahel, targets Abner, Saul's commander. Abner is confident he can defeat Asahel but is hesitant to do so as it would spark terrible blood between Saul's and David's camp and himself and Joab. And yet Asahel stubbornly refuses to break off the chase resulting in his death (1:23). Despite Asahel's death, or perhaps because of it, Asahel's brothers, Joab and Abishai, and David's soldiers continue to chase Abner and the Benjaminite army.

Once again, the tribe of Benjamin stands on the edge of decimation. At a critical moment, Abner cries to Joab about the futility of one tribe wiping out another and the bitterness it will bring. Seeing reason, Joab and his men cease their attack. Abner retreats east across the Jordan to Mahanaim (where Jacob encamped, Genesis 32:2). Joab retrieves his brother's body, buries him in the family plot in Bethlehem, and then returns to David in Hebron.

No, the civil war did not end there. It would be at least two years of fighting for Saul's side to back down and seven years from David's coronation in Hebron to his full kingship over all Israel. In the interim, David had more children. The notable names to remember for the future are Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah (3:2-5). In chapter 3, David's strength grows against Saul's family. A rift erupts between Ish-Bosheth, king of Israel, and his commander, Abner. Ish-Bosheth falsely accuses Abner of making moves on one of Saul's former concubines (3:7). This accusation is a very serious one because it makes Abner look like he's making a play for the throne. This assumption deeply offends loyal Abner, who threatens to hand the kingdom over to David, which he could easily do (3:9-10). Abner makes good on his threat. He sees that it's time for David to become king over all Israel, and he contacts David to make arrangements. David is willing, but he has only one condition that his first wife, Saul's daughter, is returned to him. Again, this is a strategic maneuver more than an emotional one on David's part. Their reinstated marriage will seal the breach between the two clans, which David knows is very important. And so, it's done with King Ish-Bosheth's help (3:15).

The time has come to make David king over Israel per the Lord's promise and anointing. Abner acts as the mediator between the elders of Israel and Benjamin (Saul's family), and David. At a covenant meal, Abner agrees to "seal the deal." As Abner is leaving, Joab returns from a raid. Hearing that his archenemy, the man who killed his brother, has just left, vengeance rises in Joab. He rebukes David for letting an "enemy of the state" go rather than dispatching him. Unbeknownst to David, Joab takes matters into his own hands. Right. Like that always works out with the Lord, as we often saw with Saul's issues.

Joab calls back the unsuspecting commander. Abner, thinking that enough time has passed (about seven years) since he killed Joab's brother in battle, allows Joab to pull him aside for a private conversation. Bad move. The unprincipled and ruthless Joab stabs Abner to death out of revenge. Later, we find out that Joab's brother, Abishai, was also involved (3:30).

When David hears of the cowardly act of revenge, he disavows all knowledge of the murder, calls down a curse on Joab and his family, and commands all Israel to mourn Saul's honorable commander. David even refuses to eat because he's genuinely grieved over Abner's death. David's actions have a profound effect on the Israelite people, convincing them of David's innocence in the matter and showing his soft and merciful heart for former enemies (3:36-37).

INSIGHT

What two things are noticeably absent from David's funeral dirge for Saul? They are Saul's character flaws and suicide. No, David isn't trying to "preach Saul into heaven." But the time of a person's death is a time to remember their goodness and attributes, and people already know others' faults. Death is a time to honor a person's life as much as possible, and it's the gracious thing to do since the dead cannot defend themselves.

March 24 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 4-8

SUMMARY

What a mess! What could have been a clean transfer of power becomes a disaster because of human reasoning and desires. First, Abner is killed needlessly, and now in chapter 4, Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth, is heartlessly killed by two guys who thought they were doing Judah's King David a service. Well, like the young Amalekite man who presumed on David's desire, Baanah and Rechab are executed for their unwarranted and unauthorized killing (4:11-12). That's all pretty straightforward. But what I want to point out is a slight aside in the text, "Saul's son Jonathan had a son whose feet were crippled. He was five years old when the report about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nanny picked him up and fled, but as she was hurrying to flee, he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth" (4:4). Remember this boy and his tough-to-pronounce name.

In chapter 5, despite all attempts of man to help David gain his rightful place as Israel's king, God's time for him has finally arrived. David has refused to capitulate to people's desires or assassinate his way to obtain his God-promised throne. By his faithfulness, David finally achieves Yehovah's plan for his life – becoming king of all Israel. After seven years of ruling in Hebron (starting at age thirty), David is finally anointed and proclaimed king as he continues his forty-year reign (5:4).

Jerusalem is about eighteen miles north of Hebron. Even today, these cities are enormously significant and have been fought over fiercely in the last one hundred years. In our reading for today, David brings the fight to Jerusalem (called Jebus) to wrest control of the city from the Jebusites.

Why is Jerusalem such an important city? Because it's ground-zero for God's plan. So much of God's prophetic timetable focuses on this city. Jerusalem's first mention is Salem (Genesis 14:18-20). Salem's leader was the priest-king, Melchizedek, which means "king of righteousness." Jerusalem is built around Mount Moriah, today's Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Jerusalem was, is, and will be, the focal point of God's most significant works on earth from Abraham, David, and Jesus. It was in Jerusalem that Jesus died and rose again, and it will be Jerusalem to which Jesus will return and reign on David's throne as a fulfillment of prophecy. Jewish sources on the special-ness and holiness of Jerusalem call it "the navel of the world" and the gate over Sheol. Scriptures say it's the place where water will gush forth and flow east and west. From the heart of Jerusalem, a fountain of healing will be opened to Israel and the whole world (Zechariah 12-14). All that said, it's no surprise to me that Yehovah prompts David to take the city from the Canaanite Jebusites.

When David moves to take Jebus (Jerusalem), the Jebusites mock David, saying that the weakest, most decrepit of their people can keep Israel's king from taking the city. Sorry, they lose. David makes a sneak attack on the stronghold by moving his troops up a water shaft and conquers the city (5:8). You can see that shaft today!

Now that Israel has a king and a capital city, Hiram from Tyre (Lebanon today) sends materials and workers to build David a palace. Hiram's favor confirms again to David that the Lord has called him as Israel's king (5:12). Next, David expands his family with more wives, concubines, and subsequent children (5:13-14). Seriously! How did David get any rest?

Finally, upon hearing of David's succession to the throne, the Philistines try to attack Israel twice, and it's an opportune time to do so before a king becomes established. But, both times, the Philistines are defeated. For the first battle, it was David's standard tactics with the Lord's help. For the second battle, the Lord gave David a supernatural experience. The king is to launch Israel's attack only when David hears marching in the tops of the trees "for then the Lord will have gone out ahead of you to strike down the army of the Philistines" (5:24).

Chapter 6 is a tough learning curve for David. You could label this section "Right Motive, Wrong Method." Think back to the beginning of 1 Samuel. After the Philistines returned the captured Ark to Israel, the Israelites of Beth-Shemesh sent it to Kiriath-Jearim for safe-keeping. It had been there throughout Saul's reign and for the first seven years of David's. Now, David wants to bring the Ark of God (God's throne) near his throne in Jerusalem. Apparently, the Levites forgot how to transport such a holy item.

The Torah commands that it be carried by poles and only by the Kohathite line of the Levite family, "Aaron and his sons are to finish covering the holy objects and all their equipment whenever the camp is to move on. The Kohathites will come and carry them, but *they are not to touch the holy objects or they will die*. These are the transportation duties of the Kohathites regarding the tent of meeting" (Numbers 4:15). But how do the Levites move the Ark? They obviously used the poles *to set the Ark on a new cart, just like the Philistines did!* But that's not Yehovah's protocol. That's man's way. The cart hit a bump and shook, threatening to topple the Ark (6:6). One of the priests, Uzziah reached out to steady the Ark and was struck dead. Based on Numbers 4:15, you can't say they weren't warned! "But Lord, we had a perfect idea! The cart was new to honor You. We had Your designated staff in place. And we had a totally awesome worship team. How can you possibly be displeased with us?" "Innovation" or "excellence" is a substitute for basic

obedience. David is so upset the whole worship parade stops, and the team drops the Ark off at Obed-Edom's house (a Levite home) until David figures out what went wrong.

It didn't take long, about three months (6:11). David hears the Lord has blessed Obed-Edom's home, and he wants the Lord's presence and blessing in Jerusalem. This time they worship parade organizers get it right! "They have the Right Motive and the Right Method." They carry the Ark to its new home while presenting offerings along the entire route. David is so ecstatic over the Lord's presence he strips off his outer garment to dance in front of everyone unceremoniously! The team places the Ark in a Tent David had erected for it, and David blesses everyone who was part of the procession, sending them home laden with food gifts. Just to be clear, the Ark was initially separated from the Tabernacle at Shiloh during the Philistine escapade in 1 Samuel 4-5. The Philistines returned the Ark to Israel not long after, but it was never reunited with the Tent. The Ark stayed in Keriath-Jearim until David moved it to Jerusalem. During the Ark's twenty-two-year "sojourn," the Tabernacle had to be moved because of the Philistine threat. The Israelites relocated the Tabernacle to Gibeon. As of today's reading, the Ark is in a specially prepared Tent in Jerusalem while the Tabernacle and the sacrificial functions operate in Gibeon. The two will finally reunite when Solomon builds Yehovah's Temple.

Chapter 7 is a profound moment in David's life – Yehovah's covenant with him. King David has his palace and relief from his enemies, all is quiet, and David notices something. While he lives in a cedar palace (quite a luxurious thing in those days), the Ark of the Lord rests in a humble tent. A house of cedar is a big deal, like building a church with imported Italian marble, mahogany from Brazil, and gold from South Africa. But what does the Creator of the Universe, the Shepherd of Israel, have for a home? A tent?

To make this right, David gets the idea about building the Lord His own house. Even though David's prophet, Nathan, tells him to go ahead with his plan, the Lord pulls Nathan up short and sends him back to David with a message. By the way, who is this, Nathan? He was one of David's advisors and a prophet. Not a bad person to have on your royal team, eh? Nathan spoke for God, advised David on spiritual matters, chronicled the king's efforts, coordinated the Temple worship music, helped transition the kingdom from David to Solomon, and was able to go eye-to-eye with a powerful king (David) when he needed a harsh rebuke. May the Lord raise many such men and women in our day to guide our leaders! Okay, back to the message.

What does the Lord say to David? 1) "Why build me a house? I've been "tenting it" with my people since I got them out of Egypt. Have I ever asked anyone for new digs?" 2) "On

the other hand, I will make you great, O man whom I called from the flocks to shepherd My people. Your name (David's fame and reputation) will be one of the greatest. Furthermore, I'm going to give My people a home where their enemies will never bother them again." 3) And finally, "You build me a house? Nope. I'm going to build *you* a house, a royal family line. I will *never* take it from any of your descendants, even if they get out of line and I have to discipline them. Be assured, David. Your royal family line will rule forever!" You know, that's a pretty good word from the Lord. What's remarkable is we've already seen that David isn't perfect, and yet Yehovah embraces this man who is after His heart.

Imagine what your reaction would be had Yehovah said that to you. As for David, it rocked him. Sometimes the only response to God's mercy and revelation is to go and sit before the Lord, take time to process His Word, and worship. So, where did David go to have his time with the Lord? Into the Lord's presence – before the Ark in the Tabernacle David set up for the Lord. As usual, David bursts into a song of thanksgiving and praise to His loving Lord.

David's song is simple. The song is organized around questions such as, "Who am I? What can I say in response? Who is like Your people, Yehovah?" (7:18, 20, 23). The final section is simply David agreeing with the Lord, "Yes, Lord. Your will be done! Fulfill Your word and bless my family as You've promised" (7:25-29)

Our reading today closes out with chapter 8, a chronicle of David's victories and a summary of the key figures in his administration. David struck down and subdued the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans, Hadadezer (from the Euphrates River region), the Edomites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites. The Lord is truly blessing the man after His own heart!

INSIGHT

Regarding the Philistines' attack on David just after his inauguration as king over all Israel, there's a good lesson in it. When we reach a new spiritual level in our lives or embark on a new ministry or a new situation, our spiritual enemy often uses the opportunity to attack us. Satan and his minions do this to hit us when we're unsure of ourselves in the new situation, prevent us from putting down strong spiritual roots, discourage us, and even enslave us as his "vassal." When revivals hit and people are set free from their spiritual enemy, the enemy often hits back before people are established in their faith and grow strong in the Lord.

Here's another lesson that we can glean from David's two different strategies to defeat the Philistines: When confronting our spiritual enemies or undertaking new ventures, be open to the possibility that the Lord may use various methods and means. The seven last words of many churches have often been, "We've never done it that way before."

March 25 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 9-12

SUMMARY

Hey! Do you remember that I asked you to note Mephibosheth's cool name? (Try saying that 5x fast!) Ta-da! Here's his story in chapter 9, and it's a wonderful one!

Now that David is firmly ensconced as Israel's king, he keeps his promise to Jonathan to seek out any of Saul's family members for Jonathan's sake. A former servant, Ziba, tells David of Jonathan's injured son. For the back story of how the young man's feet were disabled, reread 2 Samuel 4:4. In the act of covenant loyalty (love), David brings the young man from the far northeastern region of Israel (east southeast of the Sea of Galilee) to the palace. Of course, Mephibosheth probably thinks it's all a ploy to execute all contenders for the throne, but is he ever wrong! Listen to what David says, "'Don't be afraid,' David said to him, 'since I intend to show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all your grandfather Saul's fields, and you will always eat meals at my table'" (9:7). I kid you not, and it gets me right here (as I poke my chest). David put Saul's former servant Ziba in charge of the family farms, and "Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem because he always ate at the king's table. His feet had been injured" (9:13). Man, I'm tearing up!

Okay, now that I've composed myself, it's time to launch into chapter 10 as we're Cruisin' Through The Bible. It starts with David being gracious again. The king of the Ammonites (descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew) dies, and his son, Hanun, takes the throne. Like a good neighboring king, David seeks to keep the royal relationship going because Hunan's father had been good to David (10:2). Well, Hanun treats David's emissaries in a *highly* disrespectful manner. In the ancient world and for biblical Hebrews, beards were essential, so Hunan shaves off half their beards. What a nice guy (insert sarcasm here). Also, public nakedness was humiliating, so Hunan cut off the emissaries' robes at the waist. Doubly nice (bathed in even more sarcasm). Then Hunan sends David's emissaries away in that condition. It's a great way to pick a fight in the ancient Middle East.

David hears of the insult and has his servants stay in Jericho until their beards regrow. Meanwhile, Hunan rightly assumes David's going to retaliate. I love this verse. It's such an understatement, "When the Ammonites realized they had become repulsive to David" (10:6). No really? (Loads of sarcasm here). Hunan gets some hired guns from Aram, Ma'acah, and Tob to tilt the fight his way in anticipation of hostilities. It's a good thing Hunan brings a lot of troops to the battle because David sends out his elite force under Joab's and his brother Abishai's command.

As it's a two-front battle, Joab divides the forces and puts the 2nd force under Abishai's command (10:9-10). But the Israelites win! Huzzah! The Arameans scatter, the Ammonites flee into their city, and Joab returns to Jerusalem. But this has ticked off the Arameans who launch a revenge attack on David. Surely, they can take this upstart king. Nope. David gathers his full Israelite force, crosses the Jordan River, and David's side wins handily. The Arameans turn and run like the wimps they are, and the other kingdoms figure it would be best to make a covenant with David rather than backing Hunan, the loser. In the words of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, "They chose... wisely."

Up to this point, David's been doing pretty well. Until he doesn't. What happens here in chapter 11 will soon cause a cascade of disasters that will unleash pain and suffering on not just the king but his family and all Israel. If you want a lesson about how sin's effects spread far and wide (like Achan of Jericho infamy), this is it.

As a reminder, many of the houses at the time were built with flat roofs. Flat roofs were an excellent place for work, storage, and catching a cool evening breeze rather than sitting in a sun-baked clay house as it radiated the day's heat in the evening. So that's what David is doing. He's taking a cooling break because being a king and fighting many battles is tough work.

David's house was evidently higher than the surrounding houses, likely a higher place on the hill just south of Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. From his vantage point, he sees a gorgeous woman bathing herself. Not content with just spying on her, David gets it into his noggin that he can sleep with her. What, like he doesn't already have enough wives to satisfy him? Seriously, I can never figure that one out. He inquires after the woman and finds out she's married to one of his elite troopers, Uriah the Hittite. No matter. The king can have what he wants, right? (Wrong!)

There's an important point here. Bathsheba "had just been purifying herself from her uncleanness" (11:4) which meant the shedding of her menstrual cycle had ended. According to the Torah, she could once again sleep with her husband (had he been there). Perhaps David felt he was safe from conceiving a child? David sleeps with her, and you got it. She gets pregnant. I know what you're thinking. Why didn't Bathsheba tell David to take a hike right off his rooftop? Well, what the potentate wanted, the potentate got. And boy is he about to get it!

Surprise! Bathsheba is pregnant. Now that Uriah's wife has conceived, the issue of adultery and its consequences enter into the equation. Plus, the king is not exempt from

the Torah commands and punishments for adultery. So what does David do? Like any sane, rational tyrant, he tries to cover it up (11:6). He calls Uriah home, gives him a gift, and urges him to have a little alone time (R&R) with his beautiful (now pregnant) wife. Most translations have David encouraging Uriah to go home and “wash his feet.” Didn’t I tell you in the book of Ruth that “uncovering a man’s feet” was a euphemism? Hey! Stop that snickering! Oh, grow up, for goodness sake!

Anyway, this plan allows David to credit Uriah with the “touchdown” rather than David. But wouldn’t you know, Uriah is an honorable man (unlike David at this point). Uriah doesn’t feel right about enjoying creature comforts while his war buddies are in the field, so he sleeps at the door of the palace (11:9). David tries the same plan again, only this time David plies Uriah with great food and strong drink, but no go. Uriah sleeps on a cot in the servants’ quarters. Oh well, I guess David will have to get rid of Uriah. And that’s what he does.

David returns Uriah to the front with a note instructing Joab to move into the thick of battle near the city walls and then withdraw from around Uriah, making him an easy target (11:16-17). Sadly, it worked. With Uriah’s death, David’s betrayal and coverup are complete. He invites with fair widow Bathsheba to join his collection of wives. No one knows a thing except for the Lord. He knows, and He’ll deal harshly with David (11:27).

Finally, in chapter 12, the Lord takes action. Yehovah sends his servant, Nathan, David’s faithful prophet, to the king to tell him a little story about a rich man who stole a poor man’s little lamb to consume it. It’s totally an unjust situation because the rich man had all he needed and more. Why would he take the poor man’s lamb (12:4)? David is incensed and declares the man must be punished by death! Nathan whirls about thrusts his finger in David’s face, and declares, “You are the man!” (12:7). Nathan proceeds to give Adulterer and Murderer David a prophetic beatdown. “This is what the Lord God of Israel says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from Saul. I gave your master’s house to you and your master’s wives into your arms, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah, and if that was not enough, I would have given you even more. Why then have you despised the Lord’s command by doing what I consider evil? You struck down Uriah the Hethite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife—you murdered him with the Ammonite’s sword’ (12:7-9). I can just see the blood drain from David’s face.

Now the Lord unloads David’s punishment. “The sword will never leave David’s house” means that there will be strife, fighting, and bloodshed in his family for the rest of David’s life. Yehovah will punish David in kind. As David slept with Uriah’s wife, another will

sleep with David's wives, but it will be public, not private. The Lord will expose what David did in secret for all to see through this act. The only reprieve David will have is he will not be executed. But knowing what I know about what's coming in David's life, he'll probably wish he had died on the spot.

There's hope, though. David repented sincerely, and the Psalms captured his prayer and repentance songs. As we "drive by them," I'll point them out, but here is a sample of David's brokenness before the Lord – Psalm 51. Be sure to read the heading before you slowly read into the psalm. It's heart-wrenching and beautiful all at the same time. It's one of my personal favorites, which I've returned to repeatedly.

It doesn't take long for the Lord's punishment to fall. But first, understand the timeline. David impregnates Bathsheba, and then shortly after she realizes she's pregnant, David dispatches Uriah. So David lives with the guilt of these two secret sins for at least eight months. Not long after David's son is born, the Lord strikes the infant with a terminal condition. It takes seven days for the baby to die, during which David continually fasts and cries out in agony for the Lord to spare his firstborn child with Bathsheba, but to no avail. Once his son dies, David's grieving is over. He accepts the Lord's justice and faces it head-on, "He answered, 'While the baby was alive, I fasted and wept because I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let him live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I'll go to him, but he will never return to me'" (12:22-23). That's so sad.

And now, there's more hope! Bathsheba again becomes pregnant, and she gives birth to a remarkable son of whom many people have heard – Solomon! What's even better than his birth is the Lord's love for him and his God-given nickname, Jedidiah ("Beloved of the Lord") (12:24-25). Even if you've never read through the Hebrew scriptures about Solomon, you just know something good will come through this kid.

And finally, we have an account of David's triumph over the Ammonite city of Rabbah (25:29). And this wasn't the last Ammonite city David captured and subdued. I guess the Ammonites shouldn't have picked that fight with David, eh?

INSIGHT

Mephibosheth's story always gets me because I see the Lord's grace all over it. King David is our Heavenly Father's template for the One True King from the lineage of Judah, Jesus, the Anointed One. Aren't we all formerly of the enemy's kingdom? Aren't we all injured and helpless in some way? And isn't Jesus gracious, generous, and extremely

loving to invite us all to dine with Him forever? Read and meditate on Mephibosheth's account if you're ever feeling down.

March 26 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 13-14

SUMMARY

Well, that didn't take long. Yehovah's prophesied judgment begins immediately in chapter 13. In this very sordid affair, the main characters are Amnon (David's oldest son by his wife Ahinoam) and Tamar and Absalom (David's daughter and son by his wife, Maacah). That makes Absalom and Tamar Amnon's half-brother and half-sister. Are you still with me? Good.

Tamar is a lovely woman, and Amnon falls in love with his half-sister (13:1). He "loves" her so much he makes himself ill (13:2). Yes, the Bible says he's love-sick. Amnon shares his distress with his first cousin, Jonadab, who wickedly advises Amnon on a plan to bed Tamar. All Amnon has to do is fake like he's ill and ask his father for Tamar to care for him. Then when the two are alone, Amnon will make his move. Surely, Tamar will cooperate with her half-brother's desire, right? The way Jonadab leaves the plan implies, "Then do what you want, Amnon."

Amnon puts his cousin's plan into motion. He feigns sickness and claims to be so weak he needs Tamar to care for him (13:6). After dismissing all the other attendants, Amnon asks Tamar to come close to help him eat. When the unsuspecting Tamar approaches, Amnon grabs her and asks her to sleep with him. The shocked Tamar gives Amnon strong reasons why they can't do such a thing. 1) This sexual arrangement is not allowed in Israel per the Torah! It says, "You are not to have sexual intercourse with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's, whether born at home or born elsewhere. You are not to have sex with her" (Leviticus 18:9). This command alone should have been enough to stop Amnon's advances. He proposed a disgraceful (intensely immoral) thing that was never allowed. 2) "Where would I go with my shame/disgrace?" 3) "You would be like one of the fools (Hebrew *nabal*, moral reprobates [shameless, ignoring standards of right and wrong]) in Israel."

Sadly, none of that deterred the determined, inflamed-by-lust Amnon. But once he was satisfied, his lust turned to revulsion and hatred (13:15). Obviously, he knew he had done evil, and his conscience was burning. There was only one thing he felt to do: turn her out and lock the door behind her.

Tamar's grief is intense! In her distress and humiliation, she throws ashes on her head, tears her "royal daughter" robe in dismay, and stumbles about sobbing with her hand on her head. Tamar's brother, Absalom, finds her, figures out what just happened, and tries to comfort her (13:20). Because Tamar is no longer a virgin by such an evil act, the chances

of becoming someone's wife have dropped very low. Despite her beauty, she's become a desolate woman and will be for life. Thankfully, Absalom lovingly cares for her in his home.

Yeah, I'm with you. At this point, I really want to see Amnon "get it." So does Absalom. King David hears what happened and is furious. Absalom is also enraged, but it's an intense, burning hatred of Amnon. Do you feel things are getting tense in David's family? Well, you're right. *But David did nothing!* As king and father, should he have done more? Absolutely! If David had acted swiftly and justly without preference, he could have ended these evil events before they spiraled out of control. But is there a "firstborn" son element in this as Amnon was David's first male child? Very likely. That means Amnon was the king-in-waiting. But what is the punishment for such a crime? Amnon most certainly deserved the death penalty! The Torah stipulates, "If a man marries his sister, whether his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, and they have sexual relations, it is a disgrace. They must be cut off publicly from their people. He has had sexual intercourse with his sister; he will bear his punishment" (Leviticus 20:17). So why did King David balk at executing his son? I wonder if David's awareness of his own sins of adultery and murder made him unwilling to act swiftly and justly? Regardless, he took no action, but Absalom will. But remember the Lord's prophecy through Nathan that foretold intense trouble in David's family? The Lord had seen this coming due to David's sin, and He allowed it as part of the king's judgment.

Two years later, Absalom's plan comes to fruition (13:28). His father's lack of action allowed Absalom's vengeance to rise to the point of murder. He plans to kill Amnon at sheep-shearing time, known for its wild celebration and feasting. How would clueless Amnon suspect anything when Absalom and friends are partying? Amnon has no idea that he's one of the sheep that's about to be sheared!

Absalom asks for the king's presence and his father's servants, likely knowing David would decline as he did. Absalom then asks, "So, if you can't go, how about the next one in line, Amnon?" Even though David questions him, the king relents.

The plan succeeds, and Absalom's men do the deed. When word gets back to David, it sounds to him like Absalom has killed all of his brothers, which deeply grieves David (13:30-31). But then Jonadab (Amnon's cousin, remember?) speaks up. He reveals that Absalom had killed only Amnon *and that Absalom had been planning the attack for two years!* What kind of absentee father is David to be utterly unaware of this? The rest of David's sons return to the palace and confirm Jonadab's words while Absalom flees to Talmai, son of Ammihud, king of Geshur (13:37). Geshur was a small region east of the Sea of

Galilee in Menassah's eastern territory. David mourns for Amnon daily. The sword and strife had indeed visited David's house as Nathan prophesied. After David finishes grieving for Amnon, his heart turns toward Absalom and longs for his return.

It's challenging to have a leader preoccupied with grief or unresolved family conflict. David's commander, Joab, sees how bad the situation is after three years of exile, and he schemes a way to bring Absalom home for reconciliation with his father. He uses an old woman and a fabricated story to make his point, "But God would not take away a life; He would devise plans so that the one banished from him does not remain banished" (14:14). David eventually sees through the machinations, but Joab has made his point. King David grants amnesty to Absalom, but on one condition, "He may return to his house, but he may not see my face" (14:24). Joab retrieves Absalom from Geshur, and David's son settles in Jerusalem. Despite being restored to his father's vicinity, Absalom remains shunned for what he did.

What follows is a brief description of how handsome and virile Absalom looked (14:25). Yes, his outward form and demeanor lent him a kingly air. During his two-year shunning, Absalom produced three sons and a daughter named after her aunt, Tamar. Like her aunt, young Tamar was also very beautiful.

After two years, Absalom grows tired of being ignored. It's a bit funny that he has to burn Joab's barley field to get the commander's attention to once again advocate for Absalom's complete restoration with his father. With Joab once again as a mediator, David invites his son into his presence and heart. And so all is right with the world.

Until it isn't.

INSIGHT

Although it's in the background, it seems David is a bit unsure about parenting. Yes, he's powerful and triumphant on the field, but as for his family life, he seems not to be such a man of action. David delays Amnon's punishment which inexcusably drives Absalom to murder. He delays restoring Absalom from his Geshur exile, prompting Joab to make a move. And David's lack of action causes Absalom to take matters into his hands once again to achieve complete forgiveness and family restoration, *five years after taking Amnon's life*. This lack of family oversight will cause David tremendous heartache of his life and risk all-out civil war in his kingdom.

A good parenting tip from these two chapters is for parents to address issues quickly and fairly. Otherwise, feelings fester, which can have long-range repercussions.

March 27 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 15-17

SUMMARY

Hey, do you remember that short description of how “handsome and virile” Absalom looked? Do you remember how his cut hair weighed five pounds at his annual trip to the salon? Do you also remember how no man in Israel was as “highly praised” as Absalom was? How do you think that affected him? Yup. A perfect recipe for pride.

Furthermore, although his father was handsome as a young man and likely retained those smashing good looks into middle age, David was probably a little dinged up from battle and worn from the cares of life. The throne had a well-worn king. But you know, a little new blood would freshen things up a bit. And that’s precisely what’s coming – fresh blood.

Absalom is going to launch a coup to claim his father’s throne. As I ponder why Absalom would do this, I wonder if it wasn’t his father’s inaction that got him thinking he could pull it off without much opposition. It was true his father was a tremendous fighter, but what if Absalom could swing the people’s hearts to his side? The less support his father had, the easier it would be for Absalom to take the throne. But what most people miss is that all this is not in human hands. This mess is part of God’s judgment on David for his sins of adultery and murder, “You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife—you murdered him with the Ammonite’s sword. Now therefore, *the sword will never leave your house* because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hethite to be your own wife.’ This is what the Lord says, ‘*I am going to bring disaster on you from your own family: I will take your wives and give them to another before your very eyes, and he will sleep with them in broad daylight.* You acted in secret, but I will do this before all Israel and in broad daylight’” (2 Samuel 12:10-11). And so David’s judgment falls.

It all starts with handsome Absalom schmoozing the people of Israel. He wins their hearts by impressing them with outward displays of kingship (15:1), sympathy and compassion, and the promise to make proper judgments for all aggrieved people (15:2), and just outright sucking up to the populous (15:5). He played the people like a Stradivarius (a violin which wouldn’t be invented for millennia, but you get the idea).

After four years of setting up his play, Absalom is ready. Under the pretense of going to Hebron to fulfill a vow to the Lord, Absalom gets David’s blessing to go (15:8). At the same time, he sends messengers throughout Israel to prepare the people for a big announcement. He lets everyone know that once the *shofarim* (ram’s horn trumpets) blow

in Hebron, neighboring towns would begin to blow their trumpets. The signal would spread throughout the land accompanied by the cry, "Absalom has become king in Hebron!" Why is Hebron significant? Because it's where his father was first crowned Israel's king. Next, Absalom invites two hundred clueless men to go with him to his coronation. Uh, I mean, "vow fulfillment ceremony." Absalom also conscripts David's reliable and wise advisor, Ahithophel from Giloh, to be with him during the ceremony.

Thankfully, an informer sees everything and rushes to David to rat Absalom out. It doesn't take David long to figure out what's going on. And the race is on!

David assembles his family and staff for an all-palace evacuation, leaving ten concubines (David's auxiliary wives) behind to watch over the palace. David heads east across the Kidron Valley toward the Judean wilderness with his entourage and stops on the eastern edge of Jerusalem and inspects the people as they file past (15:18). The last group is his special guards, mighty men, six hundred of them. Do you want to see a picture of loyalty? Take note of Ittai of Gath. Gath is one of the towns in Philistia that David conquered. Ittai had arrived in town to serve David just the day before, and now he's on the receiving end of a royal insurrection. But he hangs tight with the king. What a trooper!

Next comes the Levites, led by Zadok, the priest. He and his team are schlepping the Ark of the Covenant out of Jerusalem to keep it safe from Absalom. But David has a brilliant idea. They are to return the Ark to the city and continue to serve in David's Tabernacle. While Zadok operates close to Absalom, he'll relay intel to his sons, Ahimaaz and Jonathan, who will forward it to David's team at the Jordan River fords (15:27-28).

David soon learns that his wisest advisor, Ahithophel, has turned coat. He asks the Lord to turn Ahithophel's counsel into "foolishness," and to make sure it happens, David also asks Hushai the Archite to go back and serve alongside Ahithophel to act as PsyOps to contradict and mess up the counselor's advice to Absalom.

On to chapter 16, the flight to the Jordan River ford presses on! Do you remember Ziba, Mephibosheth's servant? He meets David just on the other side of the Mount of Olives with provisions and feeds David a line about Mephibosheth betraying David by aligning with Absalom (16:3). Not knowing the truth, David grants all of Mephibosheth's land and possessions to Ziba. Is the servant lying? Only time will tell.

As David and his entourage descend toward the Judean wilderness, a despicable character emerges from his house and begins to cuss out David and throw stones at the people. Admittedly, this is an idiotic idea since David only has six hundred men who

could remove Shimei's head in a flash. But David characteristically takes the hits (literally) because he knows this is all part of God's judgment for what he did (16:10). We find out why the weasel is attacking David, and it's because Shimei is a Benjaminite from the same tribe Saul was. Yes, there's a bit of inter-tribal abuse going on here. But David presses on, and eventually, everybody reaches their destination.

In the final scene from chapter 16, Absalom questions Hushai why he would leave David's employment for his. Hushai makes a case that he serves the Lord and the Lord's choice. How much more when it's King David's son? Absalom buys it. Now Absalom turns to Ahithophel for advice about what to do next. As a side note, the text records that Ahithophel's advice is like getting a word from God. Was it? Likely so because Ahithophel advises Absalom to sleep with his father's concubines, which fulfills the Lord's punishment for David's sin. On a purely human note, doing so is a public "claim" on the throne, not to mention an insult to the still-living David. David's rebellious offspring follows through with the public insult and claim to his father's throne.

And now, things begin to get shaky for Absalom. Chapter 17 opens with Absalom trying to decide how to go after his father to secure his kingdom. Absalom's goal means pursuing David to kill him. Ahithophel gives good advice to pursue the weary David, but the Lord thwarts his plan through Hushai. Hushai advises Absalom to stay put for a bit, and he uses two tactics to convince the usurper. 1) David is an experienced warrior. He's a formidable strategist, and he knows the wilderness like the back of his hand. If Absalom fails to capture David, the Israelites will hear of it, and the usurper king will lose support. 2) Hushai advises Absalom, "Build your army with all your faithful Israelites. Go into battle at the head of a massive force! Then hit your father with everything you've got! Pull down any city that gives the former king sanctuary. Make a spectacle of it." Do you see what Hushai is doing? He's playing to Absalom's vanity and pride. So, of course, Absalom listens to him.

The scene now shifts to Hushai passing intel to David via a servant girl to Jonathan and Ahimaaz. Hushai's advice is for David to keep running while Absalom wastes time assembling a large army, and David will have time to rest and recoup. Then when Absalom's army shows up, David will be more than ready for them.

A young lad sees the two spies and tattles on them to Absalom, who sends servants to get them. Thankfully, a man and his wife do the same thing that Rahab did with Joshua's two spies during the Jericho reconnaissance. His wife hides the spies, and she fibs to the servants that the spies had kept going toward the Jordan River. The servants still search the grounds, but upon not finding them, they return to Absalom.

Probably the most prescient person (big word, huh?) is Ahithophel. He realizes his advice was absolutely right, but Absalom disregarded it in favor of Hushai's counsel. Ahithophel sees the writing on the wall. Absalom should have hit David when the king and his people were tired and resting at the Jordan River. But the king now has time to escape and regroup. Once the king likely defeats Absalom and takes back the throne, Ahithophel will be executed for treason. So the King's Counselor goes home, calmly puts his affairs in order, and beats David to the inevitable punch by committing suicide (17:23).

And now the chess pieces are staged for the final battle. David has reached his desired battleground, Mahanaim, on the other side of the river. Absalom has quickly assembled his forces for the attack and arrives at the same ford that David has crossed. Absalom's cousin, Amasa, commands his army. Now, who is Amasa? He's David's nephew by his half-sister Abigail and her husband Ithra (2 Samuel 17:25). If you're keeping score, this is how everything lines up: It's King Absalom vs. King David and Amasa, Absalom's cousin vs. Joab, David's cousin and commander of David's mighty men. Pretty messy, huh? Yehovah wasn't kidding when He told David the sword would rise from within his own family!

The chapter ends with David and company settling down to be refreshed by Shobi of the Ammonites, Machir from Lo-debar, and Barzillai of Gilead.

INSIGHT

It's incredible how the Lord was so gracious to David even when the king was under His judgment. We, too, bring God's hand upon us in various degrees when we sin. Often it's a tap on our consciences. At other times, it's a more decisive rebuke. The point is to motivate us to confess, repent (change our ways), and live better the Lord's way. But sometimes, we commit a sin that's a real doozy that brings immediate and long-term consequences to a broader circle of people around us. Adultery and subsequent divorce, for example. Even amid the Lord's chastisement and discipline, His mercy is there to help us. It comes from the circumstances He arranges and the people He places around us. Never lose heart if you find yourself in such a situation. The Lord's love and mercy never end.

March 28 : Scriptures 2 Samuel 18-20

SUMMARY

And now comes the climax and denouement (“the final resolution of the intricacies of a plot”). Chapter 18 is the big battle. David divides his forces three ways under Joab’s, Abishai’s (Joab’s brother), and Ittai’s (David’s Mighty Men commander) leadership. While David wants to go out and fight as he’s used to, the people tell him to stay back at HQ. They know David is Absalom’s target, and they want to keep him alive at all costs. David agrees, and he commands his leaders to take Absalom alive and treat him gently (18:5). You have to hand it to David. Even after all the devastation Absalom has caused his father, David is still willing to extend fatherly love and mercy to his rebellious son.

What follows is, sadly, the consequence of David’s sin. A leader’s sin can have far-reaching outcomes for their people. What started with adultery and a single murder is now climaxing with twenty thousand battlefield deaths, not to mention many injuries. According to the text, the forest killed more (through hazards and possibly wild animals) than soldier-to-soldier fighting (18:7). The battle spreads over a wide area.

What David agreed to do, stay back in a protected enclave, Absalom failed to do. As the young man rides through the forest, Absalom encounters David’s warriors. The handsome king’s hair becomes caught in a tree’s branches as he makes his unsuccessful escape (18:9). Absalom is left dangling in the air as his mule rides off. David’s men report the Absalom-sighting to their commander, Joab, who criticizes them for not killing the usurper. But the men refuse to do so because they heard David’s specific command to the leaders, and no one is about to draw the king’s wrath. So, Joab takes matters into his own hands. Actually, he takes three spears into his own hands, finds Absalom, and promptly sinks them into Absalom’s chest. Ten of Joab’s armorbearers surround the still-alive usurper and put an end to Absalom and the insurrection (18:16). They remove Absalom’s body from the tree, throw him into a pit, and pile a mound of rocks over his body. Done and done. Once Israel’s warriors hear of Absalom’s death, they immediately run for home.

There’s a little parenthesis in the text about Absalom’s Pillar, an attempt to leave a legacy for himself, “When he was alive, Absalom had taken a pillar and raised it up for himself in the King’s Valley, since he thought, ‘I have no son to preserve the memory of my name.’ So he named the pillar after himself. It is still called Absalom’s Monument today” (18:18). It seems like a curious thought to include until you realize Joab and his troops just created another Absalom’s Pillar that marks the Usurper-King’s legacy of rebellion.

The rest of chapter 18 is a race to bring news of victory to David back at HQ. This episode is very bittersweet due to the first messenger's arrival to bring news of David's victory (sweet), but not the word of his son's death (bitter). When the second messenger arrives, David's hopes are dashed, and the chapter ends with David in tears.

David's misdirected anguish demoralizes his men, who thought they had won their sovereign a great victory, only to realize David was more concerned about his son than what they had done for them. The letdown was so bad his troops slunk back to HQ in shame (19:3). And yet David wept on!

Joab rightly sees what will happen if David doesn't pull himself together. Joab's rebuke bites David hard, "Today you have shamed all your soldiers — those who saved your life as well as your sons, your wives, and your concubines — *by loving your enemies and hating those who love you!* Today you have made it clear that the commanders and soldiers mean nothing to you. In fact, today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead, it would be fine with you!" (19:5-6). Joab tells David to get it together and go sit in the gate (the king's official place) as a king should do or "not a man will remain with you tonight. This will be worse for you than all the trouble that has come to you from your youth until now!" David does so, and the people are reassured.

But now it's time for David and his court to return home. Also, the Israelite troops have scattered to their homes and now begin to doubt whether David can return. "Sure, he could save us from our enemies, but his son has chased him off, and no one is talking about restoring him. What gives?" So, David gets to work restoring faith in his kingship.

First, he tells the Judahites to quit sitting on their hands and start bringing him back to Jerusalem. Second, he replaces commander Joab with commander Amasa. Why? It's obvious. Joab disobeyed the king's direct order and killed Absalom. David's not going to forgive that. Judah's elders respond and quickly move to escort David home. The little sniveler, Shimei, the twerp who threw rocks at David, was one of the first to meet the king and grovel at his feet for forgiveness. David's nephew, Abishai, figures this would be an excellent time for a bit of payback. Still, David surprises us again, "'Should any man be killed in Israel today? Am I not aware that today I'm king over Israel?' So the king said to Shimei, 'You will not die.' Then the king gave him his oath" (19:22-23). What? Oh, don't worry. Shimei gets his. But this is another example of David leaving things in Yehovah's hands to work out.

And then comes Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son whom his servant, Ziba, said was turning coat to remain in his comfy place at court? He shows up to greet David! That scores some

points with David since Mephibosheth is lame. He tells David it was all a story, cooked up by Ziba, to get Mephibosheth's stuff. So David chooses to divide all of it two ways between the owner and the steward, not knowing whom to believe. But Mephibosheth surprises us when he gives it all away because he's content with palace life. Fair enough.

Barzillai, the Gileadite, shows up to escort the king as far as possible (he's an elderly man, you know). As a reward for generously helping David in the wilderness, the king makes him a great offer to come to the palace. "You provided for me, so I'll provide for you!" But the old codger waves it off. "What? Like I can enjoy anything at my age? Tell ya what. Take Chimham with you as your servant." David acquiesces to his request (means, "Yes"), and everyone heads to their homes feeling all happy.

Except. (Why is there always an exception?) Except for the rest of the Israelites who questioned restoring the kingship when they saw the Judahites carrying David home to Jerusalem, ticking them off! "Hey, what gives? Why did you *secretly* fetch the king and not ask us? Shenanigans are going on here!" The Judahite elders answer plainly, "He's family. Why are you all bent out of shape? What special favor have we ever been shown by David?" and like petulant children, both sides get into a shouting match about "who has the greater claim on the king" and "We had the 'let's restore David to the throne' idea first." Pathetic.

Guess what happens? There's always one idiot in a group with a bad idea that gets the mob going. Sheba, a Benjaminite, decides *he will* start an insurrection now. (Didn't he just hear what happened to Absalom?) He blows the shofar and rallies the Israelites away from David, leaving only the Judahites supporting him. Nice move, Sheba. And a dumb one.

David returns to Jerusalem, sets his house in order (putting aside the now-defiled concubines), and rallies the warriors to overthrow the uprising (20:4). But when Amasa is too slow to respond, David turns back to Joab, who sets out with David's crack troops. He and his men meet Amasa with the Judahite men. Hot-head Joab pulls the same stunt with Amasa (Absalom's former commander) as with Abner (Saul's former commander). He fakes a warm greeting, then stabs his foe in the gut (20:10). Wow, Joab has a serious problem! Joab rolls dying Amasa off the road, and the combined force pursues Sheba and the break-away Israelite warriors.

Joab finally chases his foes down to the town of Abel in Beth-Maacah and lays siege to it. A wise woman of the city asks why all the fuss of a siege? Joab tells her about Sheba. The woman tells him to wait, and she'll throw Sheba's head over the wall to keep the peace.

Read it. I kid you not. She talks to townsfolk, and a moment later, *zing*, *thunk*, Sheba's head rolls to a stop at Joab's feet. Sooo, that's over. I tell ya, it's the quiet older folks you have to watch out for!

At the close of the chapter, we're left with a final list of David's key administrators again:

- Joab commanded the whole army of Israel,
- Benaiah was over the Cherethites and Pelethites (David's Mighty Men),
- Adoram was over the forced labor,
- Jehoshaphat was the court historian,
- Sheva was the court secretary,
- Zadok and Abiathar were priests,
- And Ira was David's priest.

INSIGHT

Absalom's hair was his downfall. A very thing that was his source of pride rendered him vulnerable to his enemy's attack, which ended his life. The same type of thing can easily happen to us. Pride blinds people and renders them unable to see oncoming trouble. The Bible has much to say about pride. As a Bible exercise, find an online Bible with a search function and search the word "pride" or "proud." Here are some gems I found to mull over.

"Before his downfall a person's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 18:12), "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18), and "A person's pride will humble him, but a humble spirit will gain honor" (Proverbs 29:23). Pride easily leads to a person's downfall. But as we can see with the last verse, the antidote to pride is humbleness. Honestly, we can look beautiful or handsome, and we can be enormously gifted in one or more areas. But those things never place us above other people.

I've always liked the balance I find in Romans 12:3, "For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one." We can honestly appreciate what the Lord has given us (with thanksgiving) and remember that whatever we have has been entrusted to us for Jesus' sake alone. Let's use everything we are and all we have for the Lord's kingdom and the benefit of others.