**David hears of Saul’s death and responds** Text: 2Samuel 1

*(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

We completed sermons on 1Samuel some time ago and I have been preaching from the Psalms. In doing so, I find myself wanting to know more about David, about his life and especially about his heart. David, as you know, was man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), and indeed, a ‘type’ of Christ.

In our Bibles the Book of Samuel is divided into two; this was done when it was translated into Greek. Samuel was the prophet who anointed Saul, the first king of Israel, and then anointed David. He did this reluctantly because Israel was a theocracy, rather than a monarchy. The people’s call for a king so as to be like other nations backfired badly when Saul failed to obey the Lord and then pursued David with murderous jealousy. David patiently waited for the Lord to deal with his persecutor, refusing to take matters into his own hands. Surely this is an important lesson for us to learn! It is in fact a mark of David being a ‘type’ of Christ: ‘Father, not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42).

At the end of 1Samuel, Saul commits suicide on Mt Gilboa after being wounded by the Philistines. Mt Gilboa rises sharply from the plain of Jezreel - according to photos I have seen. 2Samuel continues with the life of David who, although not of royal birth, rose to the throne of Israel. Summary verses at the end of chapter 8 mark this rise to power. Another summary section comes at the end of chapter 20, with the intervening chapters telling of David’s adultery and the wickedness of his sons, one of whom briefly grabbed the throne. The closing chapters detail further wise and foolish actions of King David.

In chapter 1 we read of David being informed of Saul’s death by a young man who got it terribly wrong when assessing David’s heart: ‘How mistaken!’ The second half of the chapter is an elegy or funeral dirge: ‘How the mighty have fallen!’

**1. How mistaken!**

We have a saying, ‘Don’t kill the messenger’, but the man bringing news of Saul’s death to David thought he could somehow profit from the message he carried. He did not ask for a bribe in return for information. What he did was embellish the facts in a way that he thought would be profitable to him.

David was attacking the Amalekites in the south when Saul was defending Israel against another Philistine attack in the north. David defeated and slaughtered the Amalekites, rescuing his own family and all Israelite captives. It was on the third day after his return to Ziklag that a man came to him with his clothes torn and dust on his head (1:2). Ziklag was a long way from Mt Gilboa, about a three day journey, but the appearance of this man was more than that of a weary traveller, or a defeated warrior. His appearance was of a man in mourning. He may have been mourning the death of comrades, or even the king, but not for a moment did he think that David would mourn Saul’s death. This young man bowed low as he approached David (1:2, 5).

David saw that this young man had something to tell him so asked where he had come from. ‘From the camp of Israel’ he replied (1:3). David, who had not yet heard about the battle on Mt Gilboa and its outcome, asked for details. The young man spoke the truth, thus far, saying that Israel was defeated with many soldiers being killed, including Saul and his son, Jonathan (1:4). David asked how he knew that Saul and Jonathan were dead. He had evidence in the form of Saul’s crown or helmet, and bracelet (1:10), but decided to embellish his report to gain favour in the eyes of David- a tragic mistake! His lie led to his death! ‘Be sure your sins will find you out’ we are told. This young man’s sin found him out the very same day. His detail of how Saul met his death differ from details given at the end of 1Samuel.

Mt Gilboa, as we have noted, rises steeply from the plain of Jezreel. The Philistines had chariots, the most feared weapon of war in those days. But chariots were useless in the hills. King Saul was hit by archers, but in 1Samuel there is no mention of chariots; Saul was slain on Mt Gilboa. The young man said he was on Mt Gilboa when ‘chariots and horsemen followed hard after’ Saul (1:6). He went on to tell how Saul saw him and called out to him. He told Saul he was an Amalekite; he later tells David he was the son of a resident alien, an Amalekite (1:8, 13). He may have been in the service of the king; he was familiar with Saul’s jealous attempts to kill David, and should have been aware of David’s regard for the Lord’s anointed.

The young man told David that at Saul’s request he stood over Saul and killed him; he reckoned that Saul would not survive anyway (1:10). In truth, Saul asked his armour-bearer to finish him off but he refused, so Saul fell on his own sword (1Sam 31:4). The young Amalekite may have witnessed Saul falling on his sword; at least he must have seen Saul thrust through by his own sword when he came upon the tragic scene. He quickly grabbed Saul’s crown and bracelet, maybe because they were valuable, or maybe because he was already planning to run off with what he thought would be good news in the ears of David. He probably made up the story about killing Saul on the way to meet David.

David believed the young man, especially when he showed evidence of Saul’s death, and went into mourning, tearing his own clothes and weeping (1:11, 12). All David’s men did the same, mourning and weeping and fasting for Saul and Jonathan and for the army of Israel; they mourned all that day (1:12). This is remarkable in light of how Saul and his army pursued David for years! Here we see David rising above normal human emotion because of his faith in God, and his commitment to obeying God’s word. David refused to harm the Lord’s anointed on two occasions. And now, learning of Saul’s death, he does not gloat or even quietly thank the Lord, but goes into mourning. Sceptics say he was thinking of his political future but there is no indication of this at any time in David’s life. His mourning was genuine.

David’s judgment upon the young Amalekite is further evidence of his respect for divinely delegated authority. He was subject to authorities appointed by God, just as we should be (Rom 13:1), remembering, of course, that God is the supreme authority. Despite great provocation, David refused to harm Saul, but this young Amalekite killed the Lord’s anointed without any provocation, or so he said. It seems he was looking for a reward or for respect from David, but he got neither. David condemned him to death saying, ‘How was it you were not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?’ (1:14). He signed his own death warrant by making up a story he thought would bring personal gain. Remember, ‘Beware your sins will, sooner or later, find you out’. The tragic irony for this young man is that he had not in fact killed the Lord’s anointed.

**2. How the mighty have fallen!**

At a funeral service we often hear a eulogy, literally ‘a word of praise’. We could give a eulogy for a person retiring, but by convention we call this a tribute or word of appreciation rather than a eulogy. The poem David writes as he mourns the death of Saul and Jonathan is a dirge or elegy or lament. David was a musician and also a poet, as we see here. We have many of his poems in the Book of Psalms of course, some of which were written before this point in time. We find psalms of lament but these are actually prayers directed to God. This lament is a simple dirge, although David wanted it taught to the children of Judah (1:18). It is called the ‘Song of the Bow’ and is written in the Book of Jasher, a book now lost that apparently recorded songs and poems related to people and events of renown within Israel. The ‘bow’ may refer Jonathan who was a skilled archer (1:22). The refrain, ‘How the mighty have fallen!’, divides this poetic lament into three sections: lament for Saul and Jonathan, lament for Jonathan, and a general lament of war.

‘How the mighty have fallen!’ refers to Saul and Jonathan, here called the ‘beauty’ or ‘glory’ of Israel (1:19). The high place is Mt Gilboa where both were slain (1Sam 31:1). All mighty men and women will one day fall and perish like the beasts; but God is powerful to redeem a soul from the power of the grave (Ps 49:12, 15). A funeral is a time to reflect on this truth, even as it is natural and right to mourn those we love and honour.

In war between nations, or even between individuals, death of the enemy is usually a cause for praise. David did not want the Philistines to start gloating over the death of King Saul. ‘Tell it not in Gath’ or ‘in the streets of Ashkelon’ (1:20); these were two of five Philistine cities, Gath being near the border with Israel and Ashkelon furthest away on the coast. David did not want ‘the daughters of the Philistines’ rejoicing and giving praise to their gods and dishonouring the true and living God of Israel.

Furthermore, David declares a curse on Mt Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan were slain. Rain and dew were seen as God’s blessing on the land, and he wanted no such blessing upon the fields of death (1:21). The shield of Saul still lay on this mountain, as far as David knew. This leather shielded had failed to protect Saul, and now lay unoiled and rotting. But David is assured that Jonathan and Saul fought valiantly for Israel, their bow and sword respectively devouring many enemies (1:22).

The father-son relationship is unique, and among the strongest of human relationships. But like all relationships, it can be severely tested, and this was certainly the case with Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan’s love for David, and defence of him, made his father angry; at one time he tried to kill his son. ‘Yet insofar as Jonathan could remain a faithful son without betraying David, he did’. Jonathan did not desert his father to join David in the desert. David understood and applauded Jonathan for his family faithfulness. He notes that even in death father and son were united. Both were great warriors, swifter than eagles and stronger than lions (1:23).

This elegy is a eulogy with no bad word being spoken of Saul. David called for ‘the daughters of Israel’ to weep over Saul. They should remember the good things Saul did for them, directly or indirectly giving them fine clothes and gold ornaments to wear (1:24). We have not heard such things about Saul before this but David, by God’s grace, saw the good side of Saul even as he experienced his brutality. When we struggle to see the good things done by people we consider our enemies, we need to ask for more grace.

In verses 25 and 26 the focus turns to Jonathan alone. David respected Saul as the Lord’s anointed, but he loved Jonathan as a brother. He felt the loss of Jonathan most deeply. Jonathan was heir apparent, but he accepted the Lord’s anointing of David. He protected David from his father Saul. Their brotherhood was not superficial; they knew the deep bond of covenant love. We referred to verse 26 when looking at the relationship between David and Jonathan back in 1Samuel. David refers to Jonathan’s love for him as wonderful, ‘surpassing the love of women’ (1:28). It is only in our society that any mention of love is regarded as sexual in nature. Love between a man and a woman is unique but does not define love. We referred to the father-son relationship. Obviously, men and women can have deep relationships that are not sexual in nature. The other day I met a man in church who was living with his brother-in-law after his wife left him; David was in fact Jonathan’s brother-in-law.

The third and final, ‘How the mighty have fallen!’ is attached to the words, ‘and the weapons of war perished’ (1:27). Weapons of war perish when there are no men to use them! It is men, and only men, who make war, which inevitably leads to death and to mourning. David was a warrior but ultimately a peacemaker. David’s greater son, Jesus Christ, is the ‘Prince of Peace’. Has He brought love and peace into your life?

**David becomes king of Judah** Text: 2Samuel 2

Saul, the first king of Israel, was killed in battle against the Philistines. He was wounded by a Philistine arrow and then fell on his own sword (1Sam 31:4). Saul had been anointed by Samuel but was later rejected by the Lord, who told Samuel to anoint David (1Sam 16:13). David was good warrior and was popular with the people, but he refused to move against Saul, against the Lord’s anointed. Saul provoked him to do so by trying for some years to capture and kill David. David lived in caves and desert strongholds, refusing to kill Saul even when he had the opportunity to do so. David was a man who feared the Lord and obeyed his word, a man after God’s own heart. He was a man of prayer who sought the Lord’s guidance in all that he did.

David was sincerely sorry to hear of Saul’s death, and especially the death of his ‘brother’ Jonathan. Even so, he must have been relieved to be free of Saul’s murderous pursuit of him. He must have realised that the way was now open for him to become king. But we soon learn that although three of Saul’s sons died with him on Mt Gilboa, one son remained (1Chron 8:33). We will now look at chapter 2 under the subheadings: ‘David, king of Judah’, ‘Saul’s son, king of Israel’, and ‘The general’s clash’.

**1. David, king of Judah**

David and his followers were in the Philistine town of Ziklag when he got news of Saul’s death. He felt it was now safe to return to the land of Israel. But David was not a man to make decisions based on feelings. David was a man who went where the Lord wanted him to go, and did what the Lord wanted him to do. The priest, Abiathar, was with David; he carried the ephod containing the Urim and the Thummim (1Sam 23, 30:7). There is no specific mention of the priest or the ephod here in this chapter, but we do read of David inquiring of the Lord about returning to his homeland of Judah. The Lord’s answer was ‘yes’, and upon further inquiry he was told to go to Hebron (2:1). Hebron was a major town in the territory of Judah and not far from David’s home town of Bethlehem. So David moved to Hebron along with his family, and all his followers and their families.

The prophet Samuel had anointed David as Saul’s successor some years before this time. This was no secret; people knew about David’s anointing. Moreover, he had proved himself worthy of this anointing during his years of exile. So when he moved to Hebron the men of Judah anointed David as their king, king over the house of Judah, the largest of the tribes. When the Philistines defeated Saul and his army on Mt Gilboa they would have taken control of Israel but there is no mention of them controlling Hebron. Some Philistines saw David as an ally anyway.

As David settled into being king of Judah, he wondered what had happened to the body of Saul. He was told that the men of Jabesh Gilead had buried Saul (2:4). Now Jabesh Gilead was way up north and across the Jordan. The men of this city risked their lives in taking the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall in Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them (1Sam 31:12). When David heard of this heroic deed, he sent messengers to Jabesh Gilead to thank them for giving Saul an honourable burial. He prayed the Lord to bless them, and himself promised to repay them for their kindness (2:6).

Was David being diplomatic in sending this message to the men of Jabesh Gilead, or was he being sincere in his prayer for them and promise to them? Maybe there was an element of both, of sincerity and of diplomacy. It is interesting that he refers to Saul as their ‘master’ rather than ‘king’, and that he refers to his own anointing as king of Judah (2:7). The men of Jabesh Gilead were from a different tribe, and they had great affection for Saul because he had saved them from brutal humiliation at the hands of the Ammonites (1Sam 11). Besides, Saul’s son will soon be made king not far from their town, in a place called Mahanaim (2:8).

A kind and encouraging message from David, king of Judah, would promote peace between David and the followers of Saul. David was not a man to lord it over others even if he was their anointed king. He sought to draw people into his kingdom through love and kind deeds. This reminds us, does it not, of the greater Son of David? Jesus went about preaching the kingdom, and healing every sickness and disease among the people, and he tells us not to lord it over others (Mat 9:35, 20:25). To share the gospel and help people, and still see no response in terms of following Jesus, can be frustrating and disappointing but this is the way of Christian ministry.

In India, Hindus refer to ‘rice Christians’, and offer money and things to converts to entice them back to Hinduism. But as you and I know, true Christians cannot be bought, or be forced to believe in Jesus. It was disturbing to read of the split in the Wesleyan church in Tonga in 1886 and the attempts to force people to change churches. This, of course, does not mean that children should be allowed to choose about coming to worship or not; children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph 6:1).

**2. Saul’s son, king of Israel**

Saul, and his sons, three of them, were killed on Mt Gilboa. Abner, Saul’s general, somehow escaped death at the hands of the Philistines, as did one of Saul’s sons, a man call Ishbosheth (2:8). This son is listed with the other three in 1Chronicles 8:33, but there is called Esh-baal. Although ‘baal’ simply means ‘lord’, it was the name given to a Canaanite god, so hardly suitable for an Israelite. So this son is called Ishbosheth or ‘man of shame’ here in 2Samuel.

This surviving son of Saul was taken by General Abner to Mahanaim and installed as king of Israel- eventually. It seems that it took time to win over various groups in the land- the people of Gilead, the Asherites, along with the people of Jezreel, Ephraim, and Benjamin. Benjamin was Saul’s territory and also the territory of Abner. We should remember that the Philistines were in control after defeating Israel, so installing another king took time, and was done well away from Philistine territory. Ishbosheth was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, all Israel apart from Judah, and he reigned just two years. David had been reigning over Judah for seven and a half years (2:10.11). It appears that it was some years before Ishbosheth could be regarded as reigning over all Israel.

Abner, like David’s general Joab, was a powerful man. He was not up to staging a *coup d‘etat* but he was manipulating the monarch. Ishbosheth appears as a rather weak character, especially in light of his later questioning of Abner’s actions (3:7). With Ishbosheth established as king of Israel in the north, and David king over Judah in Hebron, and indeed the anointed of the Lord, conflict could not be far away. Their ambitious and powerful generals would make sure of this!

**3. The general’s clash**

Abner and his men, here in verse 12 called ‘the servants of Ishbosheth’, went across the Jordan to Gibeon, a town in the territory of Benjamin, a little way north of Jerusalem. Just who arranged this meeting with Joab and the servants of David we are not told, but we read of Abner and Joab meeting at the pool of Gibeon, one each side of the pool (2:13). The fight that followed was brutal and deadly. These generals thought it right to sacrifice some twenty-four young men for their cause - not unlike what we read of poorly trained Russian recruits being used as ‘cannon fodder’ in Ukraine. Life becomes cheap in war! These generals would have argued that it was better for a few young men to die in a representative battle than to engage in all-out war. As it turned out, their effort to avoid all-out war failed.

Twelve young men from each army stepped forward to engage in hand-to-hand combat (2:15). If it had simply been wrestling, the outcome would not have been so bloody! But each man had a dagger, and as they grabbed their opponent they stabbed him in the side. They were such skilled fighters that each of them killed his opponent: ‘So they fell down together’ (2:16). If one man had survived then, presumably, his king would have been proclaimed victorious, like in the David and Goliath fight. But this did not happen, so a fierce battle broke out; it was civil war. Joab and his men, including brothers Abishai and Asahel, prevailed.

Abner and his men fled before Joab and his men. Before a truce was called, three hundred and sixty of Abner’s men were dead and just nineteen of David’s servants (2:30, 31). But among the dead on David’s side was Asahel, the brother of General Joab. Asahel was young and a fast runner. As Joab’s men chased Abner and his men, Asahel fixed his sights on Abner himself. Abner saw him coming and warned him not to continue chasing him but to chase some other young soldier. It appears that Asahel was not armed (2:21), so would soon catch up to Abner. He did not listen to Abner’s warning, or a second warning. Abner knew Asahel was Joab’s brother and did not want to make Joab an ‘avenger of blood’; he did not want personal revenge entering onto his conflict with Joab, David’s general (2:22).

As Asahel got near to Abner, Abner struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of his spear. The blunt end was not entirely blunt because it pierced Asahel right through, and he fell down dead (2:23). As his fellow soldiers passed by they recognised Asahel’s dead body and stopped to ponder the consequences of his pointless death. Joab, it appears, was not among those who saw his slain brother. He and Abishai kept chasing Abner until he took his men onto a hill. It was getting dark when Abner called out to Joab, ‘Shall the sword devour forever?’ (2:26). Joab agreed to a truce. He blew a trumpet to stop his men pursuing their fellow Israelites any further. Abner went home to Mahanaim and Joab set out for Hebron, but not before gathering his men for a head count. Just nineteen were missing, ‘and Asahel’ his brother (2:30). They took Asahel’s body and buried him in the family tomb at Bethlehem.

The civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David would continue for some time. How will it end? We know that David was the Lord’s anointed and will eventually rule over Israel. But the Lord works through the lives of people, godly and ungodly, and through events in this fallen world. David reached out to the people of Jabesh Gilead, but ambitious Abner took Saul’s son and made him king of Israel. Abner and Ishbosheth stood in the way of David ruling over all Israel. But the tragic death of Asahel would prove fateful for Abner; the ‘avenger of blood’ would get him sooner or later. And Ishbosheth was lost without Abner.

The Lord was working to bring down one and raise up another (Dan 2:21). He was working all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). Let us remember that, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us’ (Rom 8:31). Do you see the Lord working all things together for good in your life, where ‘good’ means glorifying God and enjoying him forever?

**Saul’s house falters and falls** Text: 2Samuel 3,4

After the death of King Saul, David moved his family and followers to the Hebron in the territory of Judah. Abner, who was Saul’s general, took Saul’s son, Ishbosheth, and made him king over Israel in the north. Civil war ensued; ‘There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David’ (3:1). A truce was called after an initial battle in which David’s men, led by Joab, sent Abner and his men fleeing. During this long war David’s house grew stronger and Saul’s house grew weaker. By the end of these two chapters, no one is left from Saul’s house except the crippled son of Jonathan called Mephibosheth.

Saul’s house was crippled by two cold-blooded murders, murders from which David distanced himself, thereby gaining favour with the people of Israel. David was the divinely anointed king, but he had refused to kill ‘the Lord’s anointed’, and even now patiently waited for the Lord to open the way from him to become king of Israel. The Lord allowed wicked men to pave David’s way to the throne, men who were condemned by David for their wickedness. David was being politically astute of course, but his focus was on being righteous. It is righteousness, not wickedness or political manoeuvring, that advances and exalts a nation. David’s house grew stronger through numerical growth: ‘Sons were born to David in Hebron’ (3:2). Our first subheading is, ‘David’s house grows’, our second, ‘David agrees to peace’, our third, ‘David deplores the murder of Abner’, and our fourth, ‘David condemns the murderers of Saul’s son’.

**1. David’s house grows**

David’s first wife was Michal, the daughter of Saul. She helped David flee the sword of Saul but remained in the family home all the time David was on the run. During this time Saul gave her to another man (1Sam 25:44). In the desert he married Ahinoam from Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal. Ahinoam gave him Amnon, his firstborn. Abigail’s son does not feature beyond this mention (3:2). After settling in Hebron, David married another four women. Polygamy was common in those days, especially among the ruling class, although kings of Israel were warned not to ‘multiply wives’ (Deut 17:17). David’s third son, Absalom, was born to a wife who was the daughter of the king of Geshur, a region northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Sometimes leaders took wives to cement political alliances. His fourth son was Adonijah who will feature in a contest with Solomon to replace David as king.

David’s house was growing, and he ruled it well, despite multiplying wives- at least to this point in time. Moreover, he continued to enjoy popularity with the people, in Judah at least; they anointed him as their king (2:4). The house of Saul, by contrast, was not enjoying such blessings. Ishbosheth was not a strong leader and we read nothing of his sons. Abner was the man in charge in Israel; he installed Ishbosheth and told him what to do. But one day Ishbosheth accused Abner of sleeping with one of Saul’s concubines, an act that was seen as treason. Abner angrily turned on Ishbosheth for treating him like an enemy, ‘a dog’s head’ at that (3:8). With a self- maledictory oath, he announced he was transferring his support to the house of David (3:9). It appears that Abner knew of David being anointed by Samuel. Ishbosheth was so scared of Abner that he said no more.

**2. David agrees to peace**

The king’s accusation so infuriated Abner that he decided to switch his allegiance to David. He moved quickly to send messengers to David, setting out terms for him switching his allegiance. His first question is interesting; Abner asked, ‘Whose is the land?’ (3:12). Whose indeed! Abner was the effective ruler of Israel. He promised to bring all Israel over to David under the terms of a covenant he proposed. We are not told of these terms, but no doubt this ambitious and powerful general was looking out for his own interests. David already had an ambitious and powerful general in Joab of course! Joab was as much in the dark as us with regard to the terms of Abner’s covenant. David agreed to Abner’s terms, making only one demand, namely that when he comes, he must bring Michal, daughter of Saul (3:13).

Why was David so insistent on his first wife being restored to him? He now had six other wives! Did he really love Michal? She loved him, when she married him at least. And David risked his life in getting a dowry of one hundred Philistine foreskins- two hundred in fact. He reminded the new head of Saul’s house of this in a message sent back to Abner (3:14). Michal was Saul’s daughter, so David was the deceased king’s son-in-law. With Michal as his wife David was not without claim to the throne of Israel. So, love or no love, it was politically astute for David to reclaim his wife, Michal.

Ishbosheth, who was not so politically astute, sent for Michal to be taken from her current husband, Paltiel (3:15); no doubt Abner was till telling him what to do. The picture of Paltiel weeping as he watched his wife being taken from him is moving; one wonders if David loved her as this man did. Nathan’s parable about the man with one pet lamb comes to mind. David may have had the right to claim Michal, but he already had six wives. Moreover, Michal later despised David and had no children (6:23).

When David agreed to the covenant he proposed, Abner moved to fulfil his part of the covenant and bring all Israel over to David. He consulted the elders of Israel, reminding them of the Lord’s promise concerning David as king (3:17, 18). The people of Benjamin get special mention because Saul was from this tribe, as was Abner himself (3:19). After getting everyone’s support, Abner set off with twenty men to meet David in Hebron. David received him and hosted a feast for them. David then sent Abner off in peace to gather all Israel and make a covenant installing David as their king. While Abner was sidelining Ishbosheth in this agreement with David, David was sidelining Joab. Would David end up with two generals, two ambitious and ruthless men who hated each other?

**3. David deplores the murder of Abner**

David had just finished his meeting with Abner and sent him off in peace when Joab returned from a raid with loads of plunder (3:22). Joab learned about the meeting and that Abner departed in peace. He angrily asked David why he had not arrested Abner, the effective ruler of Israel. He accused Abner of spying rather than making peace (3:25). Joab of course, knew all about deception, as we will see!

Everyone in the land was politically on edge; they were in a state of civil war, at least as far as Joab was concerned. Joab hated Abner for political as well as personal reasons. Abner had killed his little brother and Joab was set on revenge as ‘the avenger of blood’. The fact that Abner warned Asahel and that he was killed in battle did not matter to Joab; nor did the fact that Hebron was a city of refuge. Without David’s knowledge, Joab quickly sent messengers to bring Abner back to Hebron. Joab was at the city gate to welcome him. Abner had been sent away in peace and returned in peace. Joab took Abner aside and, in an act of great treachery, stabbed him in the stomach and killed him (3:27). When sin first entered the world Cain acted with the same treachery in murdering his brother Abel. I do not need to remind you that the same treachery continues today. Those who think the human race is evolving and advancing are gravely mistaken. The only advance in the human race was seen at Calvary. Only through Jesus Christ can we rise above deceit, hatred, revenge, and treachery (cf. Mat 26:52). In David we see a man who, with God’s help, was able to rise above revenge and treachery, at least up to this point in his life!

When David heard of Joab’s treachery, he immediately made it known that he had nothing to do with Abner’s death. As king of Judah, he had recently met with Abner, so people might have assumed that David was behind his murder. But David had sent him away in peace. David was not powerful enough to judge Joab as he might have liked (3:39), but he did curse Joab and his family with four curses (3:29). David was sufficiently powerful to make Joab and all with him tear their clothes, put on sackcloth, and march before the coffin of the man he had killed in cold blood. King David followed the coffin as Abner was taken and buried in Hebron (3:31, 32). David stood at the grave and wept. In a song of lament, he declared that Abner did not die as a chained criminal but at the hands of a wicked man. Moreover, David refused eat anything at the funeral wake. With a self-maledictory oath, he refused to eat until sunset (3:35).

David’s words and actions surrounding the death of Abner pleased the people (3:36). The people of Israel heard of Abner’s murder and were watching David closely; initially they probably suspected David of involvement. David’s mourning was genuine but also politically astute. His final words to the people were, ‘Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?’ (3:38).

Before moving on to the next murder we might pause and compare David and Joab. We have all had times when we felt wronged by others or even by God. Like Joab, many seek revenge, plotting for months, even years, how and when they will get back at those who hurt them. But like David, we can commit our way to the Lord, knowing that he will vindicate us in the end, if we are innocent. ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ says the Lord (Rom 12:19).

**4. David condemns the murderers of Saul’s son**

Are you up to hearing of another murder in cold blood? Was David thinking he was back in Noah’s day when, ‘the wickedness of man was very great in the earth’ (Gen 6:5). God was, of course, preparing David to captain the ship of God’s people, as it were. Just as David points forward to Christ, so the land of Israel points forward to the church and the kingdom of God.

News of Abner’s death broke the heart of Saul’s son, Ishbosheth (4:1). He had no strength to rule over Israel. Into the power vacuum stepped two opportunists, two men ready to do whatever it takes to get ahead in life. In this case it was political gain, but it could have been in business, or even in the church. Two of the kings captains, men accustomed to making quick decisions, saw an opportunity to impress the man who would soon be their king. Not only were these men in the king’s service, they were actually from the king’s tribe, making their action even more treacherous. These two men came to the palace in the middle of the day, supposedly to get supplies. Seeing Ishbosheth lying on his bed, they proceeded to stab him in the stomach and then cut off his head (4:6, 7). They managed to escape and wasted no time in conveying the head of Saul’s son to David in Hebron.

We recall David’s response to the Amalekite who brought Saul’s head to David; David reminded these two men of this incident. If they had heard about it they learned nothing from it regarding David’s character (4:10). They thought David hated Saul and all his family because he tried so hard to kill David (4:8). They thought they were doing David a favour. They thought as worldly men, not as a man after God’s own heart. David declares that the Lord is the one who avenges and redeems a man’s life. They acted foolishly and treacherously in killing a man in cold blood. David refers to Ishbosheth as a ‘righteous person’. He was not the Lord’s anointed, but he was innocent and not deserving of death. These two murderers, on the other hand, were deserving of death, so David gave the command for them to be executed, their hands and feet cut off and their bodies hung in a public place in Hebron (4:12). They would die in shame, unlike Ishbosheth, whose head was buried in the tomb of Abner in Hebron.

After two murders the way for David to become king of Israel was clear; but this was the Lord’s doing not David’s. David mourned both men who were murdered, and judged the murderers. There is a brief aside in verse 4, put in parenthesis in the NIV, about Jonathan’s crippled son, Mephibosheth. This aside may be to indicate that Mephibosheth was the only person left to dispute David’s claim to the throne of Israel, or it may be to introduce this man whom David will later honour (9:1f).

David waited upon the Lord to fulfil his promise, refusing to take matters into his own hands. What about you? Are you patiently waiting upon the Lord to deliver you from some difficulty or difficult person, to provide for you or to strengthen you? If so, you have learnt something from David.

**David becomes king of all Israel** Text: 2Samuel 5

Jerusalem was in the news again recently, and again because of violent communal clashes. This so called ‘holy city’ is today a place of much unholiness. There was unrest in Jerusalem because the Jews were celebrating Passover, the Muslims were celebrating Ramadan, and the Christians Easter. These celebrations are the focus of these religions, although true Christians do not get caught up in pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Sure, our Saviour and Lord died on a cross outside this city, and was buried in a tomb nearby, but Jesus is no longer in either place; he is risen and ascended to heaven. His presence is now in the hearts of believers by his Spirit, and ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them’ (Mat 18:20).

Here in 2Samuel we read of the establishment of Jerusalem as the city from which David ruled, and which later housed the Ark of the Covenant. It was the presence of the ark that made it the holy city of Jerusalem. Some five centuries later, the city and its temple were destroyed by the Babylonian’s.

Jerusalem was occupied the Jebusites. Joshua was not able to dislodge these people when he conquered Canaan (Josh 15:63). They remained there until the day that David was made king of Israel. David was made king after all the bloodshed of the previous chapters. His nemesis, King Saul, was killed by the Lord (1Chron 10:14). The Lord in his sovereignty had Abner remove, and also Saul’s son who had been set up as king of Israel. David had been made king of Judah in Hebron, but with Abner and Saul’s son dead the way was open for him to become king over all Israel. Yet David did not rush in and grab this power for himself; he waited upon the Lord, as always. We see the Lord establish David as king over Israel, establish Jerusalem as the capital city, and then establish Israel’s power over the Philistines.

**1. Establish the throne of David**

‘All the nations of Israel came to David at Hebron’ (5:1). It was probably representatives from all the tribes because in verse 3 we read that, ‘All the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron’. David did not go north to establish his rule over all Israel but waited until the people came to him. He would be a shepherd leader, not a driver of the flock. Abner had already come to David at Hebron to make an agreement with him, but the terms of that agreement would not have been the same as the terms of the agreement David makes with them (5:3), although we are not told the terms of either covenant.

People from all the tribes came to David at Hebron wanting David to be their king. They gave him three reasons in making this request. Firstly, David was their own flesh and blood, or flesh and bone (5:1). They had witnessed a bloody civil war, a war between brothers. They were all one people when Moses led them out of Egypt and when Joshua brought them into Canaan. The Lord gave them Saul as their king, but then rejected him to anoint David. Saul became very ‘tribal’, as earthly kings do, relying on men from his own tribe of Benjamin for security. David, on the other hand, was supported by his own family from Judah but was married to Saul’s daughter and his best friend was Saul’s son. The people of Israel overlooked their differences and looked to the things they had in common with David and the people of Judah. Too often we focus on differences we have with other people or other churches instead of focusing on the things we have in common. Tribe or culture or language should not divide Christians when all worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.

The second reason given for having David as their king was the fact that he had proven himself as an effective leader when he served in Saul’s army (5:2). They had seen David’s courage and his trust in the Lord since the day he killed Goliath and delivered them from the Philistines.

The third reason put to David by the tribes of Israel was that the Lord had anointed him as their king. Everyone, it seems, knew that Samuel had anointed David even while Saul was king- Saul certainly did (1Sam 24:20). The people refer to the Lord calling David to ‘shepherd my people Israel, and be ruler over Israel’ (5:2). We know that David was shepherd of his father’s sheep when he was anointed by Samuel, but this is the first time this title is given to him as ruler over the people of God.

David refers to the Lord as his shepherd in Psalm 23, and saw himself as an under-shepherd. This is a most appropriate title for a king as it points to his duties in protecting and providing for those he leads. Too many leaders become more like wolves than shepherds, men who use and abuse the flock given into their care. David’s greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, adopted the title ‘Shepherd’: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11).

Jesus is referred to as the good shepherd, the great shepherd, and the chief shepherd (Heb 13:20, 1Peter 5:4). The apostle Paul tells the elders of the church to ‘shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:28). Let us remember Jesus as our shepherd, our great shepherd. As chief shepherd he has under shepherds, of which you may be one. The family needs a shepherd as its head, and the church needs shepherds as leaders. Remember, a shepherd feeds and leads the flock, and pays heed to their cries.

David responded to the ‘cry’ of the elders of Israel, their cry for him to become their king, by making a covenant with them (5:3). This time it was David making a covenant, not Abner (cf.3:21), and this time it was, ‘before the Lord’. We are not told the details of this covenant, but it would have laid down the responsibilities of both parties, the king and the people. The king had a covenant or constitution to adhere to, unlike the kings of other nations. Note that this was the initiative of David, and again, that this covenant was signed in the presence of the Lord.

One writer makes the interesting comment that, ‘Our lives are given meaning by the covenants we make, and keep’- a comment worth reflecting on. Few in our society want to make or keep any covenant. The marriage covenant is disregarded by many- with obvious outcomes. This covenant, and the resulting family, gives meaning to life for most people- when they adhere to it! Our covenant with the Lord, or his covenant with us, gives ultimate meaning to life. God makes a covenant with us in the blood of Jesus Christ, a promise to forgive our sins and make us his people: ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. What more do you need to give meaning to your life? ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep’.

With a covenant in place, the people of Israel anointed David king over Israel (5:3). They affirmed the Lord’s anointing through his prophet Samuel all those years ago. David was just thirty years old when he began to reign. It is amazing that the President of the USA is thinking to continue in this role when he is over eighty. David’s reign began in Hebron, where he reigned for seven and a half years, and continued in Jerusalem from where he reigned over all Israel for another thirty-three years (5:5).

**2. Establish the city of David**

Jerusalem was a strategic city for David for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it was on the border between north and south Israel, between Benjamin and Judah. Saul, remember, was from the tribe of Benjamin which was allocated a small strip of land from the Jordan west towards Philistine territory. Secondly, Jerusalem was a fortress city atop cliffs at the junction of two valleys or ravines. The Jebusites built and occupied this ‘city of Jebus’, and could not be dislodged by the Israelites- until now! David saw this city as the ideal place from which to rule Israel; besides, he did not want this pocket of Canaanites left in the land.

David took his men to capture this stronghold or fortress city, but the Jebusites stood there and mocked him saying, ‘Even the blind and the lame will repel you’ (5:6). David was not deterred; he offered to reward the man who climbed the water shaft to enter the city and take it (5:8). We have no further details, but clearly David saw this as a way to enter the city. Joab achieved this feat (1Chron 11:6) and David turned their mocking words back on the Jebusites. David destroyed the Jebusites, presumably, and made this strategic city his own, calling it the city of David. He built it up even stronger from a site called ‘the Millo’ inwards (5:9). This fortress or stronghold was also called Zion, a word which may point to it being ‘a fortress located on a ridge’. Zion became another name for Jerusalem, which itself was referred to as Salem in the days of Abraham. In fact, Mt Moriah is thought to be at the same site.

‘So David went on and became great, and the Lord God of hosts was with him’ (5:10). Here is the key to David’s success, not only in taking Jerusalem but in all his life from the time he killed Goliath to the present and into the future, David knew it was the Lord who established him as king over Israel, and he knew he was responsible to the Lord for shepherding His people (5:12). We have seen David consulting the Lord in all the decisions he made, listening to the Lord, and being victorious in the strength of the Lord. This is the key to you and me having success in what we do, and to leading a blessed life; success and blessing measured in more than material terms of course. ‘When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way…’ When we walk in the ways of the world, the glory of the Lord will not be seen in our life.

When the Lord established David on the throne of Israel, neighbouring nations took note. Hiram, king of Tyre, sent cedar wood, along with carpenters and masons, to build a palace in the city of David (5:11). David later planned to build a house for the Lord, but the Lord said, ‘No’. The Lord would build David’s house, not the other way around. Many Christians want to build something for the Lord but too often they take glory to themselves, attaching their own name to the building or organisation they have established.

Settling into his palace in Jerusalem, David took more wives and concubines, and had lots of children (5:13). Children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps 127), but too many wives are not. The Lord warned the king not to multiply wives (Deut 17:17).

**3. Established Israel’s power over the Philistines**

The Philistines had been a thorn in the side of Israel all during David’s life. They had a huge, well-equipped army, and often came up and raided the cities of Israel. When David was on the run from Saul, they saw him as an ally, but now he was king of Israel things were different. It was time to test the new king! The Philistines came up the valley of Rephaim or ‘Valley of Giants’ to the southwest of Jerusalem (5:18). David, as was his custom, inquired of the Lord, and was told attack them and the Lord would drive them out. David said, ‘The Lord has broken through my enemies like a breakthrough of water’ (5:20), a sentiment expressed in the name ‘Baal Perazim’. As the Philistines fled, they left their idols or ‘gods’ behind. David and his men carried these away and burned them (5:21, 1Chron 14:12).

The Philistines regrouped and attacked again by the same route. This time the Lord told David to take a different approach; he was to circle around behind the Philistines in a place marked by mulberry/balsam/poplar trees. A sound of marching coming from the tops of these trees was the trigger for David to move upon the Philistines, ‘For then the Lord will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines’ (5:24). It seems the sound of marching sent panic into the Philistine camp, and David chased them all the way back to their own cities.

This decisive victory over the Philistines made David famous across the region, and other nations came to fear him and the nation of Israel (1Chron 14:17). This reminds us of Moses as he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. It reminds us of the church when its members fear God and listen to his word, and boldly declare his praises in all the world (e.g. Acts 5:13)

**Bringing of the ark to Jerusalem** Text: 2Samuel 6

The Bible is a unique book, and it is interesting in many ways. One thing we note about the NT is the four accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Back in the OT we find two accounts of the giving of the Law of Moses: the book of Deuteronomy is literally the second giving of the law. Today we are looking at the book of Samuel and the life of David. In the book of Chronicles we find a parallel record beginning with the death of King Saul: ‘Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the Lord’ (1Chron 10:13). Scholars look into who wrote these books, and when, but we simply note that the Bible contains more than one account of the same events which makes it harder for critics to discard the record. With David we have his own poetic record of various events in the book of Psalms. And remember that the Bible records history from God’s perspective, not man’s.

When Samuel anointed a young shepherd called David, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David. He had to wait and suffer persecution for probably seven or eight years before finally being crowned king of all Israel. He captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and built his palace in this fortified city, with help from the king of Tyre; Hiram sent him beautiful red cedar timber from Lebanon to build a palace. David also wanted to build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem (7:2). But first he had to bring the ark of God up from Baal Judah or Kirjath Jearim.

The ark ended up in the house of Abinadab in Kirjath Jearim after the Philistines sent it back into Israelite territory; it was in this place for twenty years (1Sam 7:1, 2). You will recall how the Philistines put the ark on a new cart pulled by a pair of milking cows. You may also recall how the Lord struck the men of Beth Shemesh for looking into the ark of God. Saul showed no interest in the ark but David does now that he is king and settled in Jerusalem. However, David’s initial attempt to transport the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem did not go well. Our first subheading is, ‘David stumbles’ our second, ‘The oxen stumble’ and our third, ‘Saul’s daughter stumbles’.

**1. David stumbles**

David gathered all the ‘chosen men’ or elite troops to go down with him to Kirjath Jearim for the purpose of bringing the ark of God up to Jerusalem (6:1, 2). Other people may have also gone with him but it seems this was more of a military than a religious operation. David decided the ark should be brought to the city in which he now reigned as king. He had set up the tent of meeting or tabernacle in which he would house the ark, presumably according to plans given by Moses in the Book of the Law. Maybe Abinadab had set up a tent in his place at Kirjath Jearim but there is no indication of this - although he did consecrate Eleazar his son, ‘to keep the ark of the Lord’ (1Sam 7:1).

The ark of God represented the Lord’s presence among his people, the Lord whose name is ‘the Lord of hosts’ and was enthroned between the cherubim on the cover of the ark (Ex 25:22, Ps 80:1). The ark was the most holy object associated with worship in Israel. It represented to some extent the holiness or separateness of God.

What was it that David failed to do before going down to Kirjath Jearim to bring up the ark of God? Remember what he did before he went to war with the Philistines- he inquired of the Lord (5:19). What was it that David did before building a temple in Jerusalem- he spoke with Nathan the prophet (7:2). There is no mention of priest or prophet in David’s deciding to bring the ark of God up to Jerusalem. He did what was right in his own eyes and in the eyes of the people (1Chron 13:3).

Did David think this was an obvious thing to do? Maybe so! We do many things without consulting the Lord, and sometimes this is okay. We do not consult the Lord about coming to church, although some do, so it seems. We do not wake up Sunday morning and ask the Lord if we should go to church or not, because it is written in the Bible: ‘Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together’ (Heb 10:25). David should have prayed before deciding to bring the ark to Jerusalem, but more than this, he should have read what is written in God’s word! We do not need to pray about coming to worship but we do need to look into God’s word to learn how we are to worship our holy God. Too many Christians cannot be bothered reading the Bible, and some think they can worship as they choose. Jesus said, ‘God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24); we sometimes term this the ‘regulative principle’ regarding worship.

**2. Oxen stumble**

‘So they set the ark of God on a new cart’ (6:3). Where did they get the idea of using a cart to transport the ark of God? Was it from the Philistines (1Sam 6:7)? It certainly wasn’t from the Bible. But it was a *new* cart! Like the heathen, they knew not to bring an old, broken cart as an offering to the Lord. They, as in David, had the two sons of Abinadab, namely Uzzah and Ahio, drive the two oxen pulling this new cart. Were these two men consecrated- Abinadab had consecrated his son Eleazar (1Sam 7:1). Even if these two were consecrated priests, the Law of Moses stipulated the sons or descendants of Kohath the Levite. And it stipulated that these men carry the ark on special poles made for this purpose. And not even these Levites were to ‘touch any holy thing, lest they die’ (Num 4:15).

When God makes rules he intends for people to obey them. He intends this to be his rule until he make a new rule under a new covenant. This rule regarding the ark of God was still in place in David’s day, and he should have known this. When he tried a second time to bring the ark up to Jerusalem he knew this rule (6:13); ignorance of God’s holy law was no excuse for David, and nor is it for us today! Too many Christians have taken to writing their own rules about worship, and even about salvation and about getting to heaven.

Ahio went ahead of the cart, and Uzzah behind it, as it left the house of their father. David and everyone present sang and played music as the cart carrying the ark of God set off for Jerusalem. They played all kinds of instruments, including stringed instruments, tambourines and cymbals, and instruments made of wood (6:5, 1Chron 13:8). This account is without comment from the writer regarding musical instruments, but one scholar added his own comment about some churches not allowing musical instruments in worship. I found this strange, given that David was at this point not adhering to what was written regarding the transporting of the ark of God! Clearly, ‘enthusiasm and even sincerity are not enough when Yahweh’s explicit instructions are neglected’.

When the ox cart came to the threshing floor of Nachon, the oxen stumbled and Uzzah reached out to steady the ark of God (6:6). At this the Lord’s anger was aroused: ‘God struck him … and he died there by the ark of God’ (6:7). It was written, as we have seen, not to touch this holy thing lest you die (Numb 4:15). Yes, it was a case of shock-horror for David, and he got angry. We understand that his anger was against the Lord, not at himself or at Uzzah. David saw what happened at the ‘Lord’s outbreak against Uzzah’ and therefore named the place ‘Perez Uzzah’ (6:8). David, and no doubt everyone present, feared the Lord as never before. David feared the Lord in a new and vital way, so much so that he was afraid to take the ark of God any further. He took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite, a ‘man from Gath’, where it remained for three months (6:10, 11).

During these three months the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his household (6:11). The Lord is powerful to bless; was it with children, good health, or a good harvest- we are not told but I am sure it was not by winning the lottery! During these three months David examined his relationship with the Lord. He was thankful to the Lord for establishing him on the throne of Israel but had he begun to rule in his own strength, even by his own rules? The king of Israel was not like other kings; he ruled the nation as God’s representative. I think the king of Tonga is such a king. The king was God’s under-shepherd, answerable to God in all things. David heard that the Lord was blessing the house of Obed-Edom and not his royal house during these three months. So, having reformed his ways, David went to the house of Obed-Edom to bring the ark of God up to Jerusalem (6:12).

**3. Saul’s daughter stumbles**

This time David undertook the task of moving the ark of God in accordance with what is written in God’s word (1Chron 15:13). This time oxen and sheep were sacrificed after the Levites, who were carrying the ark with its poles, had gone just six steps (6:13, 1Chron 15:15). And this time the celebration was different- it was with gladness and joy, and was orderly (6:12); there are indications that their previous celebration was ‘more revelry, merrymaking, and even jesting’. Sure, David was whirling about and singing with the sound of trumpets, but this time he was wearing a lined ephod (6:14). David discarded his royal robes to put on the simple dress of a priest. Psalm 24, with its repeated references to ‘the King of Glory’, may well come from this time of celebration.

As this procession came to the gates of Jerusalem, Michal, still being referred to as Saul’s daughter, saw David twirling about in his linen ephod and ‘despised him in her heart’ (6:16). She did not like David ‘uncovering’ himself in this manner. She thought it undignified and vulgar. Clearly, she did not appreciate the celebration or worship in which David and the people were engaged.

David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings when the ark of God was brought into Jerusalem, and into the tent or tabernacle that he had erected. Such offerings were according to the Law of Moses. David went on to bless the people in the name of the Lord of hosts. Meat from the peace offerings, along with bread and a cake of raisins, was given to everyone in Israel (6:18, 19). All the people felt blessed and were blessed as their new king re-established true worship in the land of Israel. The Passover, and indeed the Lord’s Supper instituted by Jesus, was, and is, a time of food-fellowship in the Lord.

The Passover was family-based, and so it was that ‘David returned home to bless his household’ on this wonderful occasion (6:20). But Michal, the daughter of Saul, was not in the mood to be blessed. She greeted her husband with sarcasm, calling him a base fellow for ‘uncovering himself before the female servants (6:20). David had taken off his royal robes to humble himself before the Lord in a linen ephod; Michal confused humility with being undignified. Still today, men and women seek after dignity or respect before other people in the way they dress. Labels once worn on the inside of a garment or shoes are now attached to the outside!

David did not accept Michal’s sarcastic words. He was focussed on worshipping the Lord not on impressing people. His reference to the Lord choosing him above her father was not a good way to mend their marriage relationship (6:21). David was patient and understanding with Saul, and everyone else, but does not show a great deal of wisdom in dealing with his wife. The Lord must come first in all our relationships of course, as David makes clear to Michal, but he could have been gentler, don’t you think?

The Bible does not make any judgment upon this marital dispute, but the outcome is disastrous for Michal: ‘She had no children to the day of her death’ (6:23). There is no reference to her having children with Paltiel when he was her husband, and she had none with David, and no hope of having any after her sarcastic words to him. Was the Lord punishing Michal for her pride and disrespect for her husband? It appears so. It is also apparent that this is the end of Saul’s line; even his daughter failed to produce a grandson. It is also a reminder that the Lord humbles the proud, but exalts those who humble themselves before the Lord (Prov 3:34, James 4:6, 1Peter 5:5).

**The Lord makes a covenant with David** Text: 2Samuel 7

‘The Lord had given him [David] rest from his enemies all around’ (7:1). David had had little rest in his life up till now. He spent his early adult years escaping the sword of King Saul. After Saul’s death, leaders in the land vied for power with great treachery. David was confronted by men who murdered out of revenge and personal gain; but in the end the Lord established him on the throne of Israel. David captured Jerusalem and built a house for himself in this fortified city, with the help of Hiram. David stumbled when it came to transporting the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, but he recovered, and the ark was set up in the tent he erected for it in Jerusalem. What was next for David? He was the undisputed king of Israel and all his enemies had gone quiet, out of fear for David. David acknowledged that his position and power were the outcome of God’s blessing upon him, ‘because the Lord of hosts was with him’ (5:12).

This chapter of 2Samuel is central to the book, and to the whole OT, and indeed to the NT. In this chapter the Lord promises David that through his ‘seed’ he will establish a ‘forever kingdom’ (7:13). The NT begins with the words, ‘The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham' (Mat 1:1). The apostle Paul writes of the gospel being promised through the prophets, and of Jesus Christ our Lord being born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom 1:2, 3). The gospel of Jesus Christ does not start with the birth of Jesus; it started with David, and indeed before this with Abraham, and even way back in Genesis 3:15.

God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him, promising that in him, and through him, Abraham, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). God’s covenant with Abraham and its sign of circumcision would continue for generations. The next such covenant was with David, as we see here in this chapter. There was a ‘narrowing down’ of the Abrahamic covenant to David’s family line for the purpose of God sending Messiah, his anointed, into this world. In Jesus Christ a new covenant is declared, a covenant that ‘broadens out’ to include all the nations of the world, just as the Lord promised to Abraham. With this very brief overview of the covenants God made with man, with his chosen people, let us look at this chapter that discloses God’s covenant with David and his house, under three subheadings: ‘A house for the Lord’, ‘A house for David’ and, ‘A house forever’.

**1. A house for the Lord**

The second king of Israel was a man after God’s own heart (1Sam 13:14). He wanted the Lord God to be glorified in the land, and in all the world. He felt guilty that he, as an earthly king, was living in a palace while the throne of the heavenly King was ‘inside a tent of curtains’ (7:2). When he consulted Nathan, his advisor and prophet of God, he was told to go ahead and fulfil the desire of his heart because the Lord was with him (7:3). Another prophet called Haggai would condemn the people of his day for their lack of concern for the house of God when they lived in panelled houses (Haggai 1:4).

David’s concern for the house of God was admirable, as Nathan agreed. But when the Lord spoke to Nathan the answer was different- the initial ‘yes’ became ‘no’. It was in the night, maybe by a divinely sent dream or vision that the word of the Lord came to Nathan (7:4). Notice that there is no, ‘This is the word of the Lord’ formula in his initial advice to David. Prophets did not always speak the word of the Lord; when they did they made it clear with this formula. We do not have prophets like this today because we have the written word of the Lord; so we say as Jesus did, ‘It is written’.

Nathan received a word from the Lord to give to David. That word came in the form of a rhetorical question (7:5). The answer ‘no’ came with an explanation and ended with a twist, with the Lord telling David, ‘No, I will make you a house’ (7:11). There is a play on the word ‘house’ throughout this chapter; sometimes ‘house’ means a building like a palace or temple, and sometimes it means a dynasty, as in ‘royal house’.

So how does the Lord explain this ‘No’ to David who wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem? David later explains how the Lord told him it was because he had shed too much blood (1Chron 22:8), but we do not hear the Lord saying this through Nathan. Rather, the Lord reminds David how a tent had been his home ever since he brought his people, his nation, out of Egypt. The Lord moved with his people wherever they went, never asking them to build him a ‘house of cedar’ (7:6, 7).

The Lord of all the earth does not belong to any particular place. He is with his people wherever he leads them. He did of course, lead them into Canaan to plant them in this land, a land of rest from their enemies (7:10). David was called by the Lord to lead Israel into this rest. The Lord took David from very humble beginnings and made him ruler over his people (7:8). He told David to remember all that the Lord had done for him before thinking about what he could do for the Lord. Some Christians are more concerned about doing things for the Lord than they are about remembering what the Lord has done for them.

**2. A house for David**

‘In a beautiful play on words God says that David is not to build him a house (temple); rather, God will build David a house (royal dynasty) that will last forever’- this is what we find at the end of verse 11 and following. The Lord will do more for David, and through David, than he could even dream of; although, as a man after God’s own heart he did by faith, like Abraham, see the day of Christ (John 8:56). David expected to have a son sit on the throne after him, but what the Lord promises here goes way beyond such an expectation. Note the word ‘forever’ in verse 13 and 16; no earthly kingdom has, or ever will, last forever! Note also the word ‘seed’ which the apostle Paul tells us is singular and refers to Christ (Gal 3:16, Gen 22:18).

The Lord had established David on the throne of Israel and given him rest from his enemies all around (7:1). But David would eventually ‘rest with his fathers’, as in die, and then what? Many think death is the end but the Bible says that after death comes the judgment (Heb 9:27). In the eyes of the Lord death is not the end; his plans and purposes for David’s life went beyond his actual life. David was only a part of God’s plan of salvation. The Lord set up the ‘seed’ of David after him, seed coming from his own body. David would have many ‘sons’ sit on the throne of Israel after him, but one ‘seed’ will be most important because the Lord will establish his kingdom forever, and, ‘He shall build a house for My name’ (7: 12,13). We know that David’s son, Solomon, built the first temple in Jerusalem (1Kings 6), but does the word ‘house’ in verse 13 refer to ‘temple’ or ‘dynasty’.

The Lord goes on to declare, ‘I will be his Father, and he shall be my son’ (7:14) - our translation has a small ‘s’ son, but it could also be a capital ‘S’ referring to Jesus (Mark 1:11). The possibility of this son ‘committing iniquity’ cannot apply to God’s Son, Jesus Christ, so we cannot ignore the earthly descendants of David here, any more than we can ignore his heavenly descendant born of a human, as in David’s flesh (Mat 1:1, Rom 1:3).

The Lord promises under this covenant with David not to take his hand of mercy or grace from David's son, as he did from Saul (7:15). This covenant, like all God’s covenants, is a covenant of grace; God’s grace was shown to Abraham and now to David, and was eventually revealed in all its fullness in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The closing words of the Lord’s covenant with David are unmistakably messianic (cf. 1Chron 17:14). The house or kingdom or throne of David will be established forever because Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, will occupy this throne and rule over the kingdom of God in its fulfilment in Jesus. The kingdom will become a heavenly kingdom, the throne of David a heavenly throne, and the people of Israel the people of God from all nations, tribes and languages, the new Israel of God (Gal 6:16). Wow! David was part of God’s great plan of salvation for Jew as well as Gentile. You may not be a descendant of David in the flesh, but you are part of this great plan if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. By grace through faith, you become a child of God and a member of his family, his house, and his kingdom.

**3. A house forever**

The words of the Lord brought to David by Nathan were profound and prophetic, but not beyond comprehension (7:17). ‘King David went in and sat before the Lord’, probably in stunned silence. Who was the king of Israel but a pauper or even a grasshopper (Isa 40:22) in the eyes of *Adonai Yahweh,* the Lord God or Sovereign Lord (7:18)- we find this title seven times in David’s prayer, and we find David referring to himself as a ‘Servant of the Lord’ seven times also. In college I had a lecturer who pronounced the word ‘God’ in a strange way that was somewhat distracting when he prayed. I hope you are not distracted by how I pronounce the word ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ or ‘Father’ because such words are used often in our prayers. How often do we use the words, ‘Your servant O Lord’ in our prayers?

David was humbled by the Lord’s reminder that he had taken him from the sheepfold to make him ruler over Israel (7:8). He prayed, ‘Who am I, O Lord God?’ He was humbled as he listened to the Lord’s promises regarding ‘Your servant’s house’ for ‘a great while to come’ - indeed forever (7:19). David, as we have said, was rendered speechless before the Lord: ‘Now what more can David say to you’ (7:20). The Lord knows our past and he knows our future, and he knows us through and through. Moreover, he knows everything in heaven and on earth- he is truly omniscient. This amazed David, but more than this he was amazed that the Lord God was actually telling him of the future of his house (7:21).

Our God is like no other in that he has made known his ways to us. He has spoken to us in the past by the prophets, and in these last days by his son (Heb 1:1, 2). He has spoken of the past and of the future. David learned of how the Lord God would redeem his people. He had redeemed them out of Egypt for himself, but would yet redeem them from sin and death for himself and his glory (7:23). Great and awesome deeds would yet be seen in Israel. Jesus answered the messengers sent by John the Baptist by way of assuring this prophet that Messiah had come: ‘Go tell John the things which you see and hear’ (Mat 11:4).

The covenant God made or cut with Abraham, and with Moses, was, ‘I will be your God, and you will be my people’ (Gen 17:7). According to David’s prayer, the Lord was renewing his covenant of grace with David: ‘You have made your people Israel your very own people forever, and you Lord, have become their God’ (7:24). Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you’ (John 15:15). ‘Friends’ and indeed, brothers (Heb 2:11), adopted sons and daughters of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

David finishes his prayer by urging the Lord to do as he promised (7:25). His prayer was that God’s name, not David’s, be magnified and glorified forever. David tells the Lord of hosts that he has understood the promise just made to David and his house, and that he wills the Lord fulfil his promise (7:27, 28). David chooses to confirm the will of the Lord by rehearsing it in his prayer; he makes God’s will his own will. He finds it awesome that the Lord has revealed his good, pleasing and perfect will, and as he prays finds assurance that He will surely fulfil his will for David and his house (cf. Rom 12:2). This is what we must do as ‘new covenant’ people, as people to whom God has revealed his will for us, for our house, and for the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**From river to river** Text: 2Samuel 8

‘We have no God-given right to this land. We must continue to fight in order to keep it’. These words were spoken by one of our leaders in his Anzac Day message; this man’s brother was a missionary in PNG and died as a prisoner of the Japanese. They are fine sounding words for Anzac Day but are they true. Do you think our parents or grandparents would have spoken such words? I know my grandmother gave thanks to God when we won the Second World War. Do you think King David would have spoken such words? We may not have a God-given ‘right’ to this land, but should we not see it as God given? We give thanks to the Lord for saving us from domination by a pagan power, although pagan influences and power are today arising from within our land. Recognising our land as God-given does not mean we do not have to fight to preserve our land and our freedom from enemies, be they foreign powers or attacks from within.

David fought many battles while defending and extending the borders of the land God first promised to Abraham. In the covenant God ‘cut’ with Abraham he promised to give his descendants the land from the River of Egypt to the River Euphrates; in fact, he said, ‘I have given you this land’ (Gen 15:18). In doing this God would judge the ‘sin of the Amorites’, the present inhabitants. Joshua undertook the first ‘judgment’ upon the Amorites or Canaanites, but he did not establish the extended borders promised to Abraham. It was King David who ruled over the land from river to river, although he did not settle Jewish people in all places.

The Philistines attacked Israel soon after David was made king, and David, after inquiring of the Lord, and with the Lord’s help, defeated them (5:17-25). Chapter 8 seems to pick up from where he left off with the Philistines but the opening words, ‘After this it came to pass’ are not specific with regard to time (8:1). This chapter begins with David defeating other enemy nations, tells of him dedicating captured silver and gold to the Lord, and ends with him delegating positions in his expanding administration.

**1. Defeating enemies**

The Philistines kept attacking Israel all during the reign of Saul, and actually overcame Saul in the battle that led to Saul’s death. They came up to test David when he became king, but he drove them back to Gath, as we have already seen (5:25). They attacked yet again, so it seems, and David again attacked and subdued them, taking what seems to be a city, or maybe some other object from them (‘Metheg Ammah’ 8:1, 1Chron 18:1).

We are then told of David defeating the Moabites, people who lived to the east of the Dead Sea. They were actually descendants of Lot through incest with his daughter. But Ruth, David’s grandmother, was from Moab and he sent his parents to Moab to keep them safe from Saul. Yet Saul had to fight the Moabites, and it seems David had to do the same. David defeated the Moabites and did something strange by way of retribution; strange to us to the extent that we understand what he did. What David did to the Moabite men was make them lie down and ‘measure them off with a line’ (8:2). It seems he spared every third man from being put to death; but it may be that the ‘line’ was the man’s height and that he spared boys who were one line rather than two lines in height, as in adults. Those spared by David became his servants and brought tribute to him. There is no mention of David setting up garrisons in Moab; it was close enough to move quickly against any uprising, as happened with the neighbouring Ammonites.

‘David also defeated Hadadezer… king of Zobah’ (8:3). Zobah was a region in the north, beyond Damascus and extending to the Euphrates. Details of this battle are not given, apart from the fact that David captured one thousand chariots, seven thousand cavalry and twenty thousand infantry. Another ‘strange’ thing David did was hamstring all but enough horses for one hundred chariots (8:4). A horse that was hamstrung could walk but not work or be used in warfare. David captured a lot of chariots but without horses these could not be used in any uprising against him. The captured foot-soldiers were either imprisoned or drafted into his own army over time. Whichever it was, the army of Hadadezer was wiped out.

Next among the subdued nations is ‘the Syrians of Damascus’ who came to help Hadadezer but suffered an even worse defeat. Some twenty-two thousand Syrians were killed by David’s men. David’s strategy with Syria was to set up garrisons around the country from which his men could keep watch over the Syrians. David made the Syrians his subjects and they paid tribute or taxes to him (8:6). So it was that countries to the north, all the way to the Euphrates, became subject to David, in addition to Moab to the south-east and the Philistines to west. The Ammonites to the east and the Edomites further to the south-east had previously been subdued by Israel.

David was a wise and strong leader, and a brilliant military strategist. But this is not what we are told with regard to all these victories over neighbouring nations who opposed. What we are told is that ‘The Lord preserved David wherever he went’ (8:6, 14). It is not brilliant preachers or church growth experts that the Lord is looking for; He is looking for faithful believers, men and women who will look to him, listen to him, and serve him in the strength he gives them. He found such a person in David. Has he found such a person in you?

**2. Dedicating silver and gold to the Lord**

In ancient times kings went to war to gain territory and riches; is it any different today? David, as king, went to war for different reasons. With the Philistines it was because they came against him, and it may have been the same with other nations. But it was also because the Lord told him to go and fight them, and defeat them. He went to war in obedience to the command of the Lord. When he defeated these enemies he brought home lots of plunder of course, but he did not use this to enrich himself or his family. David dedicated the treasures taken in war to the Lord (8:11). The silver, gold and bronze was put aside for use by Solomon in building the temple in Jerusalem.

The servants of Hadadezer had shields of gold, or shields covered with gold, which David took back to Jerusalem. From cities that belonged to Hadadezer David took lots of bronze back to Jerusalem with him (8:7, 8). Another king from this northern region, Toi, king of Hamath, actually sent articles of silver, gold, and bronze as gifts to David. He sent these treasures through his son, expressing gratitude that David had defeated Hadadezer, a mutual enemy (8:10). As with the treasures taken in plunder, David dedicated these gifts from King Toi to the Lord.

David amassed a huge amount of silver, gold, and bronze from the nations he subdued in extending the kingdom from river to river (8:11, 12). His son, Solomon, would later uses these precious metals in building the temple in Jerusalem. The nations of Ammon to the east and Amalek to the south had previously been conquered. The most southern nation of Edom, which belonged to the descendants of Esau, was subdued by David (8:13, 14), or by his army led by Joab (Ps 60), or Abishai (1Chron 18:12). In Edom he set up garrisons and made the Edomites his servants, no doubt demanding tribute from them.

David of course, made a name for himself through all his military conquests. Surrounding nations feared him and his own people praised him. But he did not take the glory to himself and did not make himself inordinately rich. David would have agreed with the words of the narrator: ‘The Lord gave David victories wherever he went’ (8:6, 14).

**3. Delegating tasks to others**

Protecting the nation from enemies is only one part of being a good king. It makes the king popular if they win wars of course, and some leaders provoke wars to make themselves popular. Another aspect of being a good king is administering justice within the kingdom. David was called to shepherd the flock of God. A shepherd is tasked with protecting the flock, but also with leading and feeding them. King David sat as judge for the people. People came to him with their disputes or problems, and he gave them a ruling on the matter. Absalom began his rebellion by sitting at the palace gate judging cases for the people, after telling them that David could not see them; Absalom was being deceitful of course (15:2,3).

King David reigned over Israel with justice, with truth and with equity (8:15). He showed concern for the poor and needy, for widows and orphans, as demanded by God’s law. He was king, but a king anointed by God and responsible to God. As a man after God’s own heart, he would rule according to God’s heart. Moreover, David delegated tasks to carefully selected men. No doubt minor judicial cases were dealt with by his deputies, and there were many other jobs to do as he set up his administration.

The President to the USA is not called a king, but he has a lot of power, and he has what is called his ‘administration’. He selects people for various positions, like chief of the army and secretary of state. The secretary of state advises the President, and often represents him abroad. David had a chief of army in Joab, the son of his sister, who continued in his administration, for the present. Jehoshaphat was appointed what is called ‘recorder’, which was probably a position like secretary of state (8:16).

Next were two priests, Zadok and Ahimelech (8:17). The king of Israel was responsible for maintaining true and orderly worship in the land. Our king has a similar responsibility according to the Westminster Confession; we will listen carefully to the vows he takes at his coronation next week. David seems to have functioned as a priest when bringing the ark up to Jerusalem, but in his administration or later administrations, the king was not allowed into the holy place of the tabernacle or temple. Many scholars say that because, in the time of Saul, Abiathar was the son of Ahimelech that these names should be reversed here in verse 17, and in 1Chronicles 24:6. Abiathar had escaped Saul’s massacre at Nob and brought the ephod to David when he was on the run from Saul. But Abiathar may have had a son and called him Ahimelech.

David also appointed a scribe or secretary. People who could read and write were probably few and far between in those days, so this man, Seraiah, had an important job writing letters and keeping records. The last man appointed by David was Benaiah who was ‘over both the Cherethites and the Pelethites’ (8:18); these are thought to be of Philistine origin, originally ‘sea people’ from the west. Benaiah kept these foreigners in an elite bodyguard for David. Benaiah would later be called upon by Solomon to dispatch and replace Joab. Today’s fighting in Sudan is between the regular army and an elite bodyguard, so we are told.

David’s sons were given positions in his administration when they were old enough. They were made ‘chief ministers’ or ‘chief officials’ (8:18). Growing up in the royal household, the king’s sons would naturally assist him in his administration. In time, of course, one of them would replace him as king. Which one will become a matter of contention and unrest within David’s administration? As we will see, David did not rule his own house with the same wisdom and justice as he did the nation. If in his later years David was nominated to become an elder in the church, he would hardly have passed the test of ‘a man who rules his own house well’ (1Tim 3:4).

**David shows kindness** Text: 2Samuel 9, 10

David proved to be a great warrior following his battle with Goliath. As a commander in Saul’s army, he fought against and defeated the enemies of Israel. He learned military strategies while on the run from Saul. When he became king, he led Israel’s army against pagan nations on all sides, defeating them and extending the borders of Israel. David ‘shed much blood on the earth’, according to the word of the Lord (1Chron 22:8). But David did not shed innocent blood or kill anyone in personal revenge. As king, David was not a malevolent dictator like most of his contemporaries, nor was he a benevolent bully. Benevolent bullies are kind whenever you bow down to them, but curse you if you do not bow down to them. Such men can be found in all sections of our society, even in the church.

David led an exemplary life before he became king, and even after he was crowned king of Israel. We have learned a lot of wisdom in our study of David’s life, things like patience and refusing to take revenge, like consulting the Lord before making decisions and committing our ways to the Lord. David was also a man who kept his promises. A king or political leader who keeps his promises is hard to find in our day. In fact, it is hard to find such a person in any section of our society. Thousands break their marriage vows without any sense of guilt. They suffer financial and relationship consequences but fail to consider these at the time. Having a conscience concerned about breaking promises is a great blessing.

David was a man after God’s own heart. David did not make promises lightly and he did not break promises lightly. You will recall the solemn covenant he made with his friend Jonathan (1Sam 18:3, 20:15, 42). David vowed not to cut off the descendants of Jonathan when he became king. It was common in those days for kings to kill any male who threatened their throne, sons of previous kings being first in line. Saul’s son, Jonathan, was killed in the same battle as his father (1Sam 31). Under his covenant with David, he posed no threat to David anyway. Another son, Ishbosheth, ruled briefly in Saul’s place but was assassinated by two wicked men, whom David had executed for their crime.

With peace in the land and an administration in place, David asked if there was anyone left in the house of Saul (9:1). But his concern was not to cut off any threat to his throne; rather it was to ‘show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake’ (9:1). Our first subheading is, ‘Kindness to Mephibosheth accepted’, our second, ‘Kindness to the son of Nahash rejected’ and our third, ‘Consequences of humiliating David’s envoys’.

**1. Kindness to Mephibosheth accepted**

Why did David ask if there was anyone left in Saul’s house, any descendants of Saul still alive? It was not that he wanted to kill them because he adds, ‘That I may show kindness for Jonathan’s sake’ (9:1). Jonathan was dead, and we might think that was the end of their relationship, and their covenant. Besides, no one else knew about this covenant- except the Lord- both men swore ‘in the name of the Lord’ (1Sam 20:42). But this was a long time ago and a lot of water had flowed under the bridge since then. Surely David could not be held to a promise he made all those years ago! Mephibosheth was five years old when Jonathan was killed but he now has his own son Micha (5:4, 9:12).

David was man after God’s own heart and the Lord had kept his promise to David, so David must keep his promise. The Lord takes vows very seriously, and so did David, and so must we. Is it because we take vows lightly that we fail to take hold of God’s promises to us? Remembering his vow to Jonathan and Saul, David asked if there was anyone left of Saul’s descendants. Ziba, a man who had been a servant to Saul, was called to the palace where King David asked these questions. Again, David made it clear that he wanted to show kindness to any such person, not get rid of them (9:3). The word translated ‘kindness’ is the Hebrew word ‘*chesed’* which means steadfast or covenant love. David was acting out of commitment to a covenant he made with Jonathan. Some suggest he was being politically astute in bringing Mephibosheth into the place to keep an eye on him, but a disabled man was hardly a threat to David’s throne anyway.

Ziba told David that a son of Jonathan’s was still alive, but that he was lame in his feet (9:2). We were told back in chapter 4 about Mephibosheth, and how his nurse fled with him when Saul and Jonathan perished on Mt Gilboa. In her haste, this young five-year-old boy fell and became lame in both feet; he became a paraplegic. His disability made no difference to David. David asked for Mephibosheth to be brought from the house of Machir in Lo Debar to the house of King David in Jerusalem. Ziba, it seems, was not the one looking after Mephibosheth at this time.

Mephibosheth was understandably afraid when told that King David wanted to see him. When brought to Jerusalem to meet David, Mephibosheth fell on his face saying, ‘Here is your servant’ (9:6). He could not have been more humble, or grovelling as we might say. He fell prostate in fear of what David might do to him. David quickly assured him that he wanted to show him kindness for his father’s sake (9:7). Mephibosheth breathed a sigh of relief; he could hardly believe what David said.

David promised Mephibosheth three things by way of keeping his promise to Jonathan (9:7). Firstly, Mephibosheth had nothing to fear from him but kindness. Secondly, he promised to restore all the land of his grandfather Saul. Saul’s ancestral home was in Gibeah of Benjamin; any lands acquired by him as king would have come under the administration of David. Ziba, as Saul’s servant, was apparently farming Saul’s family farm. Thirdly, Mephibosheth himself would eat at David’s table, not simply as a guest but eat ‘continually’ (9:7,13). Fear turned to overwhelming gratitude in the heart of this cripple. Mephibosheth describes himself as a ‘dead dog’, a term of contempt he made have heard others use. Disabled people were probably hidden away in those days, as they still are in many societies. Mephibosheth would no longer be hidden away because of his heritage or because of his disability but would eat at the king’s table.

David is called a ‘type of Christ’ and his response to this cripple reminds us of Jesus responding to the sick and the lame who were brought to him. David did not heal them as Jesus did, but he did show compassion to this lame man called Mephibosheth; he was special of course, in that he was the object of covenant love. By birth he was an enemy of David, but David demonstrated amazing grace in calling Mephibosheth to dine at his own table. By birth you are an enemy of God; we are all descendants of Adam and therefore born in sin. ‘But God demonstrates his own love towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). Jesus calls us to himself when we have no thought of coming into his house. He calls us and makes us his own adopted children; ‘It is by grace we are saved, through faith’ (Rom 8:30, Eph2:8). Mephibosheth ate at the king’s table like one of the king’s sons, and so will if you are an adopted child of God.

David again called Ziba to tell him that he was restoring all of Saul’s land to Mephibosheth, and that Ziba and his family and servants were to work this land for Mephibosheth and bring the harvest to him (9:10). In India land is not bought and sold as it is here. Family members who move to the city, still go back to the farm at harvest time to collect their share of the crop. In ancient Israel land also remained in the family, and here we see some of the crop being brought to Mephibosheth as a member, indeed master, of the family, even though he was eating at the king’s table. It is not clear if Mephibosheth’s son Micha ate at the king’s table, but in keeping with David’s covenant promise to Jonathan, he probably did.

**2. Kindness to the son of Nahash rejected**

After showing kindness to Mephibosheth because of the covenant he made with his father Jonathan, David went on to show kindness to Hanun, the son of another of David’s friends. The word translated ‘kindness’ is the same Hebrew word used of Mephibosheth, the word for covenant love. Did David make a covenant with Nahash, the Ammonite king? The Ammonites were descendants of Lot through his daughter but were not included with God’s covenant people. David says that Nahash showed kindness to him, probably during his time running from Saul (10:2). Saul defeated Nahash and his men at the beginning of his reign, so Nahash was no friend of Saul. He did, however, show kindness to David, and David wished to repay this kindness when he heard that Nahash had died.

Hanun took over from his father as king of Ammon. This nation, like others, was in subjection to David as king of Israel- although David did not actually fight against Ammon. David sent his condolences to Hanun by the hand of some servants, but he did not welcome them. This young king listened to bad advice from his nobles or princes. They told him that David’s men were spies, sent to spy out the city (10:3). On the basis of this advice, Hanun took David’s men and shaved off half their beards. Men were very proud of their beards in those days, so this was a terrible humiliation for these men and an affront to David.

They then cut off their clothes at the waist, exposing their buttocks, an even worse humiliation (10:4). One commentator reckons this happened before David became established because no one would dare to do such a thing after David took control of the whole region; but this is the point- Hanun was doing a very foolish thing! It didn’t take long before the people of Ammon realised their king had made them a stench in the nostrils of David (10:6). When David heard of what was done to his men, he told them to wait in Jericho, still a broken down city, until their beards grew back (10:5).

The king of Ammon had broken whatever covenant or treaty his father had made with David. He rejected David’s show of covenant kindness in an outrageous and humiliating manner. There would of course, be covenant consequences, as the people of Ammon realised, even if their king didn’t; Hanun is not mentioned after this. The people of Ammon quickly hired mercenaries from Syria and other places, a total of thirty-three thousand men, to help when David came to put town their king’s rebellion.

**3. Consequences of humiliating David’s envoys**

Sure enough, David sent ‘Joab and all the army of the mighty men’ to deal with the Ammonites (10:7). Joab needed all his mighty men because the Ammonites had gathered a huge defence force. None of these people liked David but they were mercenaries- a bit like the Russians fighting in Ukraine today. Joab found himself and his army caught in a pincer movement; the Ammonites were holed up in their fortified city and the mercenaries were out in the country (10:8). Realising he had to fight on two fronts, Joab decided to split his army into two. He told his trusted and able brother, Abishai, to go up against the Ammonites in the city while he went to fight the Syrian mercenaries in the field. The plan was that whichever was having trouble, the other would come to this aid. As Joab assembled his troops, he told them to be courageous and strong for the people and for the cities of God. He did not exactly pause to pray, but having done what he could by way of preparation, acknowledged the sovereignty of God in the outcome (10:12).

When Joab and his men drew near for battle against the Syrians, they fled (10:13). Did they simply take fright or did the Lord intervene in some way? We are not told, but seeing the Syrians flee, the Ammonites, who had come out to fight against Abishai and his men, ran back into their city. It was the Ammonites and the Syrians now being humiliated before King David and his army. Joab returned to Jerusalem having successfully dealt with the Ammonites (10:14).

The Syrians did not accept their routing at the hands of David’s men. They regrouped under the leadership of Hadadezer, and with more Syrians from ‘beyond the river’. When David heard of this uprising, he led his army across the Jordan and up to a place called Helam where the Syrians had gathered (10:17). David inflicted heavy losses on the Syrian coalition led by Hadadezer. The coalition disbanded, with individual kings accepting David’s terms of peace (10:19)

The Ammonites learned not to break their covenant with David, and the Syrians learned not to be bribed by the Ammonites. What have we learned? We have learnt to remember covenant promises because the Lord remembers and will hold us accountable for every word we speak.

**David sins** Text: 2Samuel 11

He was a long way from home in a foreign land. He was living among heathen people. He was the slave of an important man. That man’s wife lusted after this handsome young man: ‘Lie with me’ she demanded. The boss’s wife was seducing him. What was he to do? As it happened, he ended up in jail, but not before telling here, ‘How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God’ (Gen 39:9). That young man was Joseph of course, not David! That young man was a slave, not a king. But if what he was tempted to do was a sin against God, was it not the same for a king? Does God have different rules for different people?

At our recent Synod were reminded from the Larger Catechism that some sins are more heinous or serious than others: ‘From the persons offending; if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others and whose example is likely to be followed by others’ (Westminster Larger Catechism Q151). Our Synod had disciplined a retired minister. David was king of Israel. He answered to no one, except God. He had lived an exemplary life as a young soldier, especially when on the run from King Saul. David was not sinless of course, but in what we have read thus far of his life only his anger towards Nabal and threat to kill him was potentially sinful; he also acted deceitfully towards a Philistine king.

The Lord had established David on the throne of Israel, giving him victory over his enemies on every side. We have seen how David prayerfully committed his way to the Lord, at least on the battlefield. He was eager to build a house for the Lord, although we have seen him stumble when it came bringing the ark to Jerusalem. David wrote many songs of worship, songs inspired by God, but when it came to reading the Bible, he was not as diligent as he might have been. He had not read about transporting the ark. Had he not read about Joseph refusing to sin against the Lord by having sex with another man’s wife?

Chapter 11 of 2Samuel is among the best known in the Bible, particularly among Hollywood types. It is interesting that David’s sin is included in the Bible, in the life of the greatest king of Israel; it is not included in the account of David’s life given in the Book of Chronicles (see 1Chron 20). Apart from being a warning to us all, it explains the subsequent breakdown of order in David’s family. David was a man after God’s own heart, a man given the Spirit of the Lord. But still he lived with an earthly body in a fallen world and was subject to temptation. He lived as we all do, in the presence of sin. We do not attain perfection in this world. We will look at this chapter under three subheadings: ‘Commit adultery’, ‘Cover up sin’, and the terrible ‘Cost of sin’.

**1. Commit adultery**

‘Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death’ (James 1:14, 15). Was James analysing the behaviour of King David that afternoon in Jerusalem over one thousand years previously? The opening verse of this chapter explains it all! David was relaxing in his palace while his army was at war. It was spring, ‘a time when kings go out to battle’, but not so with this king. After the spring harvest, men were free to go to battle, and there was plenty of food about. Joab was leading Israel’s army in yet another battle with the Ammonites. He had their main city under siege. ‘But David remained at Jerusalem’ (11:1).

The weather was warming up so David took a nap in the afternoon. After getting up from his bed, he went to the roof of the palace to catch the evening breeze. While strolling around the roof he spotted a woman taking a bath in her backyard. The backyard would have been walled but had no roof so David could peer in from above. ‘The woman was very beautiful’ (11:2). David’s eyes focussed sharply on the body of this woman and he lusted after her in his heart. The lust of the eyes became the lust of the flesh (1John 2:16). The ‘pride of life’ also entered David’s heart because he, as king, was not content with containing that lust in his heart; he wanted that woman and he would have that woman.

David had more than seven wives and many concubines, but he wanted this woman he saw bathing in her backyard. He did not know her name, but he wanted her in his bed. He sent to find out and was told her name was Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, and wife of Uriah the Hittite (11:3). She was another man’s wife! That information should have been the end of David’s fantasy. He knew the seventh commandment, ‘Do not commit adultery’. He knew that under the law adultery was punishable by death (Lev 20:10). His own son would later write, ‘Whoever commits adultery lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul’ (Prov 6:32).

But David was king, and he got what he wanted, even another man’s wife. David knew he was accountable to the Lord, but this truth was drowned as lust flooded his heart. He sent messengers to bring Bathsheba to his bedroom. He would have her, and with his lust satisfied he would send her home. No one would know, except his servants, and the Lord God of course! There is no mention of this woman protesting but let no one suggest she was complicit. She was a ‘nobody’ to the king- apart from her beautiful body! David was abusing his position of power, long before President Clinton, Harvey Weinstein, and not a few church leaders.

David thought he could get away with his ‘one-night-stand’, but the woman conceived, and she told David (11:5). She had just completed her monthly period of being unclean when David ‘took her’, so the child was not that of her husband, who was away at war (11:4). And so began David’s desperate attempt to cover up his sin. So far he had broken two of the Ten Commandments in coveting his neighbour’s wife and committing adultery. He was about to break two more, making it four out of ten!

**2. Cover up sin**

If David had been ‘discreet’ thus far in his affair with Bathsheba, his indiscretion would soon become public knowledge because she was pregnant with his child. He could have denied any contact with ‘that woman’ but she knew the truth and so did others. The easiest way to cover his sin was to get her husband home to spend the night with her. So David sent an urgent message to his army commander telling him to send Uriah the Hittite home, and he did (11:6). Uriah was a foreigner drafted into David’s elite forces. He was also a man of morals, a man who feared God. His conscience proves to be a challenge to David, and a shame upon him.

Uriah must have wondered why the king was calling him, but David simply asked about Joab and how the war was going (11:7). He then sent Uriah to his home to ‘wash his feet’, to relax and sleep with his wife (11:8). Ironically, David was relaxing and sleeping with women, including Uriah’s wife! David sent a gift, probably wine and food, so Uriah could really relax with his wife. If Uriah had gone home David would be off the hook; his sin would be covered up, at least in the eyes of the world.

But Uriah did not go home as David had planned. He slept with the servants at the palace gate (11:9). When David was told about Uriah sleeping with the servants he called him again, asking why he had not gone down to his wife. Uriah, and others, must have wondered why he was getting so much attention from the king but he does not reveal any suspicion towards David; after all, David was the king, the God-ordained, upright leader of the nation. What Uriah said to David must have cut him to the heart, but repentance was a not on David’s mind. The ark and the army of Israel were dwelling in tents, so how could he, Uriah, go down to his house to eat and drink and lie with his wife: ‘I will not do this thing’ he swore before David (11:11). He understood what David intended, suspicion or no suspicion, but he could not be in his house with his wife when his comrades were camped out in the fields. What an indictment upon David!

David came up with another plan to get Uriah to go to his house and lie with his wife. He was desperate to cover up his sin. He told Uriah to wait another day or two before going back to the war. He also invited him to a palace party and got him drunk (11:13). He hoped that an inebriated Uriah would wander off to his house and to his wife. ‘But he did not go down to his house’ (11:13).

David was getting even more desperate. His clever plan to cover up his sin was not working. Uriah was proving to be more righteous than David. As king, David had a lot of power, but he could not get this man to sleep with his wife! Yet there was something else he could do, something even more sinful than the sin he was trying to cover up. The thought of repentance had still not entered David’s mind or heart. Repentance does not come easily to respected leaders, be they king, business leader, or church leader. Cover-up continues to be the popular way of dealing with sin, but cover-up usually involves lies and deceit, and sometimes involves making innocent people pay for the sin. David was about to break two more commandments, the commands about false witness and murder.

**3. Cost of sin**

‘In the morning it happened that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah’ (11:14). He must have skipped his morning devotion that day! Unbeknown to Uriah, he was carrying his own death sentence. A completely innocent man was sentenced to death by King David; was this the same David who refused to harm the man trying to kill him, and who protested loudly when innocent men like Ishbosheth and Abner were so treacherously murdered? David would make Uriah’s murder look like an accident of war, but even Joab was careful not to make Uriah’s ‘accident’ look too obvious.

David asked Joab to put Uriah in the frontline and have everyone else draw back, leaving Uriah exposed. Joab put Uriah in the frontline but with other, apparently expendable, men. He sent them into a danger zone near the city wall. When the men of the city came out, or came up on the city wall to fight Joab, Uriah and some other men were shot and killed. Having obeyed the king’s orders, Joab sent a messenger to convey the news to David; although the death of soldiers other than Uriah might not have pleased the king. If David complained about Joab getting too near the city wall, like the foolish son of Gideon at Thebez, the messenger was to remind David that Uriah the Hittite was dead also (11:20-24).

David’s response to the news of Uriah’s death could hardly have been more callous and uncaring. He sent a message of encouragement back to Joab saying, ‘The sword devours one as well as another’ (11:25). He told Joab not to let the death of Uriah displease him, or literally, ‘be evil in your sight’ (11:25). But David was not the ultimate judge of what was evil. The chapter ends with the solemn words, ‘But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord’, or literally, ‘was evil in the eyes of the Lord’ (11:27).

This last verse contains the first mention of the Lord’s name in this tragic tale of lust, adultery, deception, and murder. When the Lord is displeased there will be consequences, especially in the absence of repentance. David was painfully brought to repentance in the next chapter. Thankfully, there can be restoration after repentance but there will still be consequences. After mourning her dead husband, probably for seven days, Bathsheba was brought by David to the palace to be his wife, and she bore him a son, but this was only the beginning of dysfunction, sin, and death that overcame the house of David.

**You are the man** Text: 2Samuel 12

The text written on my calendar for this month reads: ‘He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy’ (Prov 28:13). These words were written by Solomon, David’s son. David himself could have written them after attempting to cover up his adultery. David took Uriah’s wife while her husband was away at war. When she became pregnant he desperately tried to cover up his sin. He brought Uriah home from the front so he could sleep with his wife, but he didn’t. David then called for Uriah to be killed in battle to cover up his sin. After committing one sin, it is not unusual for us to commit further sins as we try to cover up the first. The second sin is often ‘false witness’ or a lie, but may extend to physical action. From our youth we are taught, ‘Be sure your sins will find you out’, but we do not always listen. The Bible says, ‘You reap what you sow’ (Gal 6:7).

David was king, and kings think they can do what they like with impunity. Everyone bowed down to the king; no one dared speak against him, although Joab, his army commander, was also a powerful man. But even kings have to answer to God. The previous chapter ended with the ominous words: ‘But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord’ (11:27). When Bathsheba became a widow, David took her as his wife, but this was not the end of the matter of his sin. Sin always has consequences. The law of the Lord is perfect, so breaking this law leads to unpleasant consequences. In fact, the laws which David had broken carried the death penalty in his day. But who was going to tell David his sin? Who was going to deliver justice? Had David not succeeded in covering up his sin? His son had not yet written those words: ‘He who covers his sins will not prosper’.

The prophet Nathan appears on the scene as the Lord’s messenger. Our first subheading is, ‘Nathan’s parable’, our second, ‘Newborn dies’ and our third, ‘New name for Ammonite city’.

**1. Nathan’s parable**

As God’s prophet, Nathan was respected by the king, although it was not unknown for priests and prophets to be killed by the king. The prophet Samuel anointed David, just as we have seen a minister of the church anoint King Charles III- we no longer have prophets or priests. Prophets communicated the will of God, which is what ministers do when they preach from the Bible. Nathan communicated God’s will to David when he asked about building a house for the Lord (7:2f). But David did not consult Nathan when it came to covering up his sin; he did this all by himself!

Nathan went to speak with David because the Lord sent him (12:1). It is not easy to speak to a person about their sin, especially when that person has the power to throw you into prison or worse. But when the Lord sends, we must go; no man is more powerful than the Lord. Even so, Nathan was very tactful in confronting King David. He did not actually confront the king about his sin; he spoke a parable which moved David to condemn himself. This is the power of God’s word. It is God’s word, not our words, that has the power to convict men and women of their sin (2Tim 3:16, Heb 4:12). A knowledge of psychology may help us in understanding a sinner but does not help when it comes to dealing with their sin.

Nathan came to David and told him a story about two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks and herds, while the poor man had but one animal; not a sheep but a lamb, and not just a lamb but a ewe lamb (12:3). This little lamb was so precious to him that he brought it into his house to be nursed and to eat with him and his children: ‘It was like a daughter to him’ (12:3). One day a traveller came to stay at the rich man’s house. So what did the rich man do when it came to giving this visitor a meal? Did he go and get a lamb from one of his flocks? No! He went and took the poor man’s pet lamb to put on his table for the visitor.

Hearing this story, David felt pity for the poor man, and condemned the rich man for his lack of pity. He told Nathan that this rich man deserved to die for what he had done (12:5, 6). He must repay the poor man fourfold for his callous theft, as demanded by the law (Exod 22:1). As king, David often made judgments on cases brought before him. This hypothetical case brought by Nathan was easy to judge. The rich man was clearly guilty of having no pity in taking the poor man’s lamb, a lamb he loved like a daughter.

The prophet turned to David and solemnly declared, ‘You are the man’ (12:7). A sword pierced David’s heart as Nathan explained to him how the Lord had anointed him king, and delivered him from the hands of Saul. The Lord established David on the throne of Israel and Judah, giving Saul’s wives into his keeping (12:8). Remember Ishbosheth accusing Abner of going into Saul’s concubine- a serious matter in those days (3:7). Saul had only one wife that we know about, and one concubine. His wife was David’s mother-in-law of course.

The Lord was pointing out to David that he had richly blessed him, and would have given him even more, but David forgot these blessings. The lust of the eyes and of the flesh drove him to desire more, to desire what the Lord clearly prohibited. The Lord accused David of despising his commandments by bullying and murdering Uriah the Hittite and taking his wife. He had blood on his hand, even if his sword was clean (12:9).

David was guilty of breaking the six and seventh commandments, commandments about murder and adultery. Under the law, the penalty for breaking either was death. Wisely, David repented of his sin, and the Lord in his grace ‘put away his sin’ and declared, ‘You shall not die’ (12:13). What would have happened if David had continued covering up his sin, even before the Lord? It is only when we confess our sin that the Lord graciously forgives us: ‘If we say we have not sinned, we make Him [God] a liar’ (1John 1:8, 9). David confessed before Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ (12:13). In Psalm 51 we also hear David confessing his sin and crying to the Lord for mercy. David appeals to the Lord on the basis of his covenant love.

Forgiveness of sin means the Lord had ‘put away your sin’ or covered your sin (12:13); His covering your sin is different to your attempting to cover it! In the psalms we read of the Lord putting our sin behind his back, or removing our sin as far as the east if from the west (Ps 103:12). Sin separates us from the Lord, but when he forgives us that separation ceases. Still, sins have their consequences with regard to our life here on earth.

David’s sin gave ‘great occasion for the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme’ (12:14). They might say, ‘Look at the God of Israel tolerating David’s sin; how righteous is that?’ In every culture murder is seen as evil, and often as punishable by death. If the heathen saw David getting away with murder they would have taken a very low view of his God’s justice. David himself was outraged at the rich man taking the poor man’s lamb, saying he deserved to die. Thankfully, the Lord is more merciful than we are, but still sin has its consequences.

Declaring the word of the Lord, Nathan said, ‘Now therefore’, after accusing David of doing evil in the eyes of the Lord (12:10). He declared the following consequences. Firstly, the sword, meaning death, will never depart from David’s house. Peace will no longer exist within David’s family. How many families are broken and dysfunctional because of sin of one or more of its members? Adultery and/ or divorce is a sure way of driving peace from a family.

Secondly, one from within David’s house would rise up against him. And thirdly, this ‘neighbour’ would lie with David’s wives in broad daylight (12:11). David’s son, Absalom, conspired against him and briefly took over the palace. He showed contempt for David by lying with his concubines on the roof of the palace (16:22). What David had done in secret would be done by his son in the open.

**2. Newborn dies**

The sword would strike David’s family without delay. Nathan’s last words to David were, ‘The child who is born to you shall surely die’ (12:14). The son born to David by Uriah’s wife would become ill (12:15). While the newborn lay in its crib desperately ill, David fasted and pleaded with the Lord for this child. He lay on the ground refusing food, even when urged by the elders to eat something. After just seven days, the child died. Everyone was too scared to tell David, thinking he might mourn so deeply as to do something desperate (12:18). David noticed them whispering and asked if the child had died.

Upon learning that the child had died, David got up and washed, put on clean clothes, and went into the house of the Lord to worship (12:20). He then went home and asked for food. His servants thought this very strange behaviour. When a loved one dies most people go into mourning, putting on sackcloth and ashes and not eating anything. They like to show respect for the dead I suppose, but David’s response is more theologically sound! He explained that while the child was alive, he wept and fasted and prayed, knowing that the Lord was powerful to heal, and hoping that he would graciously do so. ‘But now he is dead; why should I fast?’ asked David (12:23). The newborn had passed from this world and would not return, not within David’s lifetime anyway. What David believed was that he would go to him (12:23).

David did not simply mean that he would join him in the grave. David believed that at death the Lord’s people go to be with him. He believed what is written in the Shorter Catechism Q37: ‘The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection’. Is this what you believe? It is not wrong to mourn the death of a loved one, but let us not mourn like those who have no hope (1Thess 4:13).

Bathsheba, now called David’s wife, would have been distraught at the death of her newborn, but we are not told any of her feelings in this sorry, sinful saga brought upon her by King David. David comforted her, and the Lord blessed her with another son called Solomon (12:24). This name may be derived from the word ‘*shalom*’, meaning peace. But the Lord had declared that David’s house would not be one of peace. Still, the Lord loved this child, who as we know, succeeded David as king of Israel. The Lord called him ‘Jedidiah’ which means ‘beloved of the Lord’ (12:25), ‘a final symbol of God’s forgiveness in the lives of David and Bathsheba’.

**3. New name for Ammonite city**

The sorry saga of David’s adultery began with him strolling around the roof of his palace when he should have been out leading his army. He sent Joab to lead the army against the Ammonites, who had rebelled yet again. The war was costly for Uriah the Hittite, and for other men, but Joab was about to take the royal city in Ammon. He sent a message to David telling him to get himself to the frontline quickly if he wanted the honour of capturing and renaming this city (12:28). He was probably fed up with doing David’s dirty work!

David wasted no time in joining the siege of Rabbah with more men. They took the city, along with lots of plunder, including the crown of their king, who presumably was killed; although most of the enemy were taken as prisoners and put to work building bricks and bridges and the like (12:31). The captured crown was pure gold, studded with precious stones. It weighed a talent of gold, equal to about 34kg (12:30). It is suggested that David did not wear this crown for very long, but it was important to symbolise David’s victory over this enemy. Do you know the weight of the crown that was carefully placed on the head of King Charles III? About 2.23kg!

The chapter ends with David back where he belonged, namely leading the army of Israel and taking responsibility for the nation of God’s people. This victory, however, will be the last David’s sees for a long time. He had stumbled badly, and his family would suffer the consequences of his sin, according to the word of the Lord, but he did not fall. David repented, and the Lord in his grace forgave him. When you repent of your sin the Lord will graciously forgive you also!

**Rape and murder in David’s house** Text: 2Samuel 13

Have you ever asked a policeman what is the worst thing about his or her job? If you do, I am sure they will reply, ‘Domestics’. They hate being called to homes to settle violent family disputes. But they reluctantly go and deal with domestics, just as I reluctantly have to deal with this ‘domestic’ recorded in the Bible. But as I was preparing this sermon I was reminded that it is important for us to know our enemy, the same enemy that came to Eve in the Garden of Eden. This enemy came to Amnon holding out ‘forbidden fruit’; has he come to you? I was also reminded that, ‘All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’ (2Tim 3:16 NIV). So as we read and meditate on this tragic tale may we learn, and indeed be warned of our battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

This tragic tale is not unique in the Bible; it actually parallels the sins of adultery and murder committed by King David. And it is far from unique when it comes to what we hear and read in the media today. ‘Did you rape her?’ the journalist asked Bruce in a TV interview; ‘She told the world that you did’. ‘No, definitely not’ he replied. A high-profile footballer was recently sent to prison for rape. Almost daily the words ‘sexual abuse’ are heard in the news. Years ago, when marriage was practiced and honoured, we hardly ever heard these words- not that sexual abuse and rape did not occur. Some think it is that these things are being called out today, which is true, but with sex outside marriage being normalised, sexual abuse has become more common. Our courts no longer rule on ‘sex outside marriage’ but on whether the sex was consensual or not.

King David lusted after another man’s wife and violated her, and now his son lusts after his own sister and violates her. The prophet Nathan declared to David by way of punishment for his adultery and murder that calamity would come upon his household and, ‘The sword shall never depart from your house’ (12:11, 10). In this chapter we see this prophecy being fulfilled. The Lord in his grace forgave David but he would still see the consequences of his sin. ‘Whatever a man sows, that he will reap’ (Gal 6:7). Our subheadings are: ‘Driven by lust-Amnon’, ‘Destruction of Tamar’s life’, and ‘Death at the hands of Absalom’.

**1. Driven by lust-Amnon**

The tragic events of this chapter occurred ‘After this’ or ‘In the course of time’ (13:1). David’s children had obviously grown up; he had children from more than six wives before taking Bathsheba. Amnon was his firstborn and Absalom his third, by another wife (3:3). Most people are familiar with the six wives of Henry VIII, king of England; David did not resort to killing his wives, just one husband! His lust for and adultery with beautiful Bathsheba was followed by the murder of Uriah her husband. The Lord forgave David, but his sins hung as a dark cloud over his household. Was this the reason he failed to exercise discipline and justice within his own family? As king, David was judge over all Israel, but not, it would seem, over his own family.

This chapter begins and ends with Absalom, the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur (3:3). It begins with Absalom’s beautiful sister, Tamar; the name means ‘date palm’ (Songs 7:7). Tamar is mentioned by name in 1Chronicles 3:9, but nothing more. The other characters in this chapter are Amnon, the son of Ahinoam, and Jonadab their cousin. Amnon was driven by lust, a case of ‘like father like son’. Lust, like pride, belongs to every sinful heart: ‘The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ (1John 2:16). But lust must not be allowed to rule our hearts if we are to avoid its consequences, and not sin against God of course. We read that Amnon ‘loved her’, his sister Tamar, but his actions show it was more lust than love. If he truly loved his sister he would not have violated her as he did.

Amnon was frustrated to the point of sickness as he lusted after his beautiful sister, ‘for she was a virgin’ (12:2). We could say he was ‘love-sick’, but he knew he could never have her; being his sister she was ‘forbidden fruit’. But he was listening to the flesh and to Satan, not to the Lord and his word. Satan was ready to lead this love-sick boy into heinous sin. And he has just the man to do his dirty work, a crafty cousin called Jonadab (13:3). He is called a friend but proves to be the sort of friend to avoid.

Jonadab showed concern that Amnon was looking thinner and more haggard by the day. Amnon confided in him that he was in love with his sister, or half-sister called Tamar, but it was not lawful for him to marry her (Lev 18:9). A wise friend would have told him, ‘You cannot have her so get over it; if you really love her you will not touch her’. But this cousin, this agent of Satan, helped Amnon plot a way to have her, a way to satisfy his lust. He told him to lie on his bed and pretend to be ill. When his father David came to check on his eldest son he should ask him to send his sister Tamar with special food; but more than this, to cook this food before his eyes, and more than this to feed him like a baby (13:5). David came and did as Amnon asked, no questions asked. Nurses were sometimes seen as therapy apart from their medicine- but not matrons! Did David think Tamar was a ‘protected sister’? Did a degree of blindness overcome him? He could have prevented this terrible sin and the resulting destruction of his daughter’s life.

Tamar obeyed her father’s instructions and went to Amnon’s house to prepare for food this sick boy (13:7, 8). She found him lying down. She took some flour and made some cakes while he watched her; and he watched her closely! When she brought the cakes to him he refused to eat. He sent all the servants out so he could be alone with Tamar. She innocently brought the cakes to him in his bedroom, and as they say, the rest is history, the history of tragedy striking David’s family as prophesied by Nathan.

Amnon grabbed his sister and forced himself upon her. She protested, reasoning with her brother that such a disgraceful thing should not be done in Israel (13:12). They had grown up together, gone to the house of the Lord together and heard the word of God read. To violate her, as he was about to do, would have brought shame upon her, as well as upon him; ‘You would be like one of the fools in Israel’ (13:13). As a fool in Israel, he was unlikely to become king. Her final desperate plea was the suggestion that he speak to the king, ‘for he will not withhold me from you’ (13:13). The king ruled with great authority and might even choose to ignore what is written- she was desperate. But, driven by lust, Amnon would not listen to reason or the pleading of his own sister to stop. He was stronger and he raped her (13:14).

**2. Destruction of Tamar’s life**

We know that Amnon’s love was actually lust because after violating her his love turned to hate. Having used and abused her, he was done with her: ‘Get up and get out!’ he shouted. We might contrast the response of the pagan man who violated Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. He wanted to marry her because he loved her (Gen 34:2, 3). Amnon knew he had sinned and, like his father, he wanted to cover it up. He wanted Tamar to go quietly and never come back. But sending her away would be even more wicked than what he had already done because covering up sin can be even more heinous than the sin itself- just ask David!

The right thing for Amnon to do would have been to confess his sin and at least show some compassion towards his victim. But sadly, treating the victim of one’s sin like dirt is the more usual response. Thankfully, he did not have time to plot her demise. When he threw ‘this thing’ out (13:17), she tore her beautiful dress, put ashes on her head, and went home crying uncontrollably (13:19). Her life was ruined. She was no longer a beautiful virgin looking forward to marriage and a family. She lived in solitude and sorrow in the home of her full brother, Absalom.

Absalom, whose name incorporates the Hebrew word for peace, was not thinking about peace when he saw his sister Tamar, and learned that she had been sent to Amnon’s room. He told Tamar to hold her peace and get over it, even as he plotted revenge (13:20). Because Amnon was her brother it was a very messy situation, and all the more because it was the royal family, and he was the crown prince.

What did David do when he heard what had happened? Did he feel guilty for sending Tamar to the room of his ‘sick’ son? We are told that he ‘was very angry’, but not told who he was angry with (13:21). If he was angry with his son, as he should have been, he failed to translate his anger into justice. How could the king judge Israel but fail to deliver justice to a woman who was raped, especially his own daughter? He knew the penalty was death (Lev 20:17). But as far as we know, David didn’t even ask Amnon to confess. Did he feel morally crippled by his own adultery and murder? In the LXX of verse 21 we find some additional words: ‘But he would not punish his own son Amnon because he loved him, for he was his firstborn’. Whatever the reason, David failed to deliver justice, and will suffer the consequences of this sin of omission.

**3. Death at the hands of Absalom**

Justice was neither done nor seen to be done in the house of David, and in the absence of either, resentment and revenge will fester. Absalom plotted revenge on his sister’s behalf, and maybe on his own behalf; he nursed this bitterness for two years; some nurse bitterness for much longer of course. While his brother broke the seventh commandment, Absalom was planning to break the sixth; their father broke both commandments all by himself!

Absalom’s men were finishing up the shearing of his sheep at a place on the southern border of Ephraim. As we have seen with Nabal, this was a time for celebrating with friends and family. Absalom invited the king’s sons and the king himself (13:23, 24). David excused himself, not wishing to be a burden to his son. He blessed Absalom; this son does not appear to be less loved than his elder brother (13:25). Absalom pleaded for David to send Amnon, the crown prince, which he did with some reluctance (13:27). We know that David was sending his son, Amnon, to his death, and that after sending his daughter to be raped. David was not to know what would happen of course, apart from the prophecy that trouble would come upon his house because of his sin (12:11).

‘Now Absalom had commanded his servants’ to strike Amnon and kill him after he had plied him with wine, which they did (13:28, 29). The other brothers took fright, jumped on their mules and fled. News reached David before the mules, news that Absalom had killed all his sons; something a son aspiring to be king might do. In distress and mourning, David tore his garments and lay on the ground. But Jonadab was on hand to explain the situation to David. This crafty fellow was always endearing himself to others for his own evil purposes, political purposes most likely. Jonadab assured David that only Amnon was dead, and he was dead because of what he did to Tamar, Absalom’s sister. He told David not to ‘take this thing to heart’, knowing that he would do just that (13:32, 33). His words to David proved to be true when the king’s sons came trotting around the hill weeping loudly like the king.

While Amnon escaped justice, Absalom was not confident he would escape justice at the hands of the king; David himself had escaped justice for murdering Uriah. Absalom decided not to return home but to flee to the home of his mother, to the house of the king of Geshur. David mourned for his son, probably Amnon, every day (13:37). But after three years his thoughts had turned to Absalom, ‘and King David longed to go to Absalom’ (13:39).

‘The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son; the soul that sins shall die’ (Ezek 18:20). Sons often follow in the sins of their father, as we see with these two sons of David, but by the grace of God not every son follows his father in this way. David failed to deliver justice to the victim of his son’s rape, so his other son took matters into his own hands and murdered his brother. Was David crippled by his own sin? He should have known, as he wrote in the psalms, that when God forgives he washes us clean. Our place of course, is to learn, not judge.

**Bring back the young man Absalom** Text: 2Samuel 14

The average prison sentence for murder in NSW is 10-12years and for rape 2years; the maximum sentences are life and 14years respectively. These are the statistics, but sometimes it seems murderers literally, ‘get away with murder’. The thing about murder is that the victim has no voice; with rape there are two voices to be heard. With murder it may be premeditated or not premeditated; the latter we call manslaughter. A person may also kill in self-defence, something defence lawyers look for, along with mental illness.

While much of our criminal code was originally drawn from the Bible, there is little overlap today. God declared to Noah, ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God he made man’ (Gen 9:6). The Law of Moses stipulated the death penalty for pre-meditated murder, but set apart cities of refuge for murderers who ‘did not lie in wait’ (Exod 21:12, 13). It also carried the death penalty for other crimes, including adultery, and rape if it was adulterous or incestuous. A kinsman-redeemer or avenger of blood was obliged to enact the death penalty, but when the monarchy was established, matters were brought before the king. In the NT we are told that the ruler or governing authority ‘does not bear the sword in vain’ (Rom 13:4).

The sword struck in David’s family, just as the prophet had said (12:10). King David himself was guilty of murder, as well as adultery. When he repented the Lord put away his sin and he did not die, but the Lord struck his newborn, and he would live with rebellion and violence in his own house. Already his third son had killed his eldest son, ostensibly for raping his sister. That rape was punishable by death under the law (Lev 20:17), but their father David, who was also judge of all Israel, did nothing except get very angry (13:21).

When Absalom murdered his brother Amnon, David did nothing either, except weep and mourn. But Absalom fled to his mother’s family home where he stayed for three years (13:36, 37). He fled because he feared judgment, as in execution, at the hands of the king, his father David (14:32). But David made no attempt to deliver justice for his murdered son Amnon; he simply mourned him until he was ‘comforted concerning Amnon, because he was dead’ (13:39). Did David think that with time all his problems would go away? Matters of justice do not just ‘go away’. Absalom was still alive even if in exile. David longed to see his living son, but as king he knew he should be delivering justice for his dead son. Conflict of interest is nothing new!

David’s feelings towards Absalom were noticed by Joab, who set about trying to reconcile father and son. It was in his own interest to do so and avoid a civil war. David was getting older, and Joab wanted a smooth transition of power so he could keep his job. Our subheadings are: ‘Listen to a wise woman’, ‘Let Absalom return’ and, ‘Let me see the king’s face’.

**1. Listen to a wise woman**

We notice something missing in David’s responses to the tragedies in his family. He got ‘very angry’ and he ‘wept very bitterly’, but he did not pray or call upon the prophet of God. Rather, he listened to a woman brought from Tekoa by Joab. She is called a ‘wise woman’ but while reading this story I thought back to the woman King Saul consulted, the medium at En Dor! This woman from Tekoa was certainly clever, but was her wisdom ‘from above’ or ‘earthly’ (James 3:15). Joab sent her because of her skills as an actor and a lawyer. He told her to pretend to be in mourning, to dress in torn clothes and look dirty. Joab also told her what to say to King David; he had learnt from Nathan the prophet the art of the parable. The woman turns out to be a very clever actor!

This woman from Tekoa went to the king and fell down before him. It is hard to ignore an old woman clutching your feet and crying for help- I know this from personal experience in India. The king responded, asking her to explain her problem. He was the ‘supreme court’ of Israel; even if she should have approached local elders first, the king could not turn her away. In fact, she made out her problem was with the local elders. Her story was that she was a widow with two sons. These two sons got into a fight where no one could stop them, and one struck the other and killed him (14:6). Naturally, the family or clan wanted justice, namely the death penalty according to the law. The woman feigned distress that no ‘ember’ would be left in her family, no one to carry on the family name; inheritance of a family name and estate was important in Israel (14:7). Moreover, the lot of a childless widow was not a happy one! After hearing the woman’s’ story, David tried to send her home with his decision pending (14:8).

The woman however, wanted an immediate answer, and a favourable one at that. She assured David that she would bear the blame for any lack of punishment, not him (14:9). David relented and promised to deal with anyone who spoke to her or touched her (14:10). But what about her imaginary son who was guilty of murder? He was in danger from the ‘avenger of blood’ according to the law of ‘the Lord your God’ (14:11). Reminding David of the law was rather bold but her whole aim, or that of Joab, was to get David to rule contrary to the law. David is trapped into making a ruling, and he does so with an oath: ‘As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground’. She set the trap and it sprung closed on David. This was another, ‘You are the man’ moment!

The woman was pleased with the outcome of her meeting with the king thus far, but she presses on to the end planned by Joab: ‘Please let your maidservant speak another word to my Lord the king’ (14:12). She now says that the king is guilty of not bringing Absalom, the now crown prince, home. This was a matter that impacted the nation not just the family. She reasons that all die in the end, and water spilled cannot be gathered up again (14:13); in other words, ‘Don’t cry over spilled milk’, just get on with life. This woman could be listed with secular humanists of our day! Her ‘earthly’ wisdom undermines the law of God. God is merciful, but he is also just, which is the message of the cross of course. She unashamedly assures David that God wants him to bring Absalom home (14:14). The woman returns to her original story, thanking David that he has listened to her and given her words of comfort, like an angel of God discerning good and evil, and blessing him. Her flattery was working well-or was it irony!

The reference to his banished son made David suspicious of this woman and her motives. So he confronts her with the question, ‘Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?’, and she does not deny that Joab had put all these words in her mouth (14:19). He did so to bring about a change of affairs between David and his son Absalom. She answered David with more flattery, and irony, saying that he will act wisely and make the right decision, the decision she cleverly trapped him into making (14:20).

**2. Let Absalom return to his own house**

Joab appeared on the scene as soon as the wise woman left- or was he in the wings all along? Having just heard that Joab was behind the whole performance, David basically admits defeat: ‘All right, I have granted this thing. Go therefore, and bring back the young man Absalom’ (14:21). For his part, Joab was greatly relieved. He bowed and thanked the king. He wasted no time in going to Geshur to fetch Absalom and bring him back to Jerusalem. Clearly, he had been in contact with Absalom during the last two years even if his father, the king, had not.

But things did not go as Joab or Absalom had hoped. The king gave permission for Absalom to return to Jerusalem but only to his own house. He was not allowed to meet with his father. Absalom was not at all happy with this situation, as we will now see. Clearly his father was not ready for reconciliation with his son. He was torn between wanting to see his son, and executing justice, as he was obliged to do as king. If it had been anyone else who murdered his son Amnon, David would have dealt with them according to the law of the Lord. Yet he could not bring himself to dealing with his son according to the law. He must have forgotten the story of Eli, the priest who God judged for honouring his sons more than the Lord (1Samuel 2:29, 30).

**3. Let me see the king’s face**

David was a man after God’s own heart who ruled Israel with power, with authority, and up till now, with justice. After he sinned he appears to have lost authority within his own family, even though God forgave his sin. His eldest son, a rapist, had been murdered by his third son, ostensibly out of revenge for this rape, after two years of plotting; the second son must have died in his youth (3:3). A person who plots revenge for two years has to be determined and deceitful (cf. 13:22).

We now learn more about Absalom, especially his physical appearance (14:25, 26). Everyone in Israel praised him for his good looks, an ominous reminder of King Saul (1Sam 9:2). Such praise was sure to ‘go to his head’ as we say. Absalom knew he was handsome, especially with his thick, long hair, which he cut once a year because it got heavy. The writer tells us the weight of his ‘shorn fleece’ was 2.5kg. This long hair will feature in Absalom’s eventual death, but for now it is his crowning glory. Is long hair in fashion today? It became so in my youth, and elders in the church became very critical; although in years gone by elders in the church had long hair! What matters of course, is how long the person spends in front of the mirror, not how long their hair is. Absalom had three sons and a daughter, whom he named Tamar because she was beautiful (14:27). His sons must have died in their youth because when he set up a monument to himself he said he had no son (18:18). We are not told anything about Absalom’s heart.

Although living in the same royal compound, two years passed without Absalom seeing the king’s face (14:28). Absalom was seeing lots of people but not his own father. We are already observing him to be a proud and arrogant young man. He got angry at being given ‘the cold shoulder’, at being ostracised within his own family. Finally, he called Joab to come so he could send him to the king. As David’s general, Joab answered to David and no one else. He had of course, supported Absalom in his desire to return home, but did not respond to being summoned by one of Absalom’s servants. When, after a second summons, Joab still did not come, Absalom resorted to criminal means to get his attention; he had his servants torch Joab’s barley crop (14:30). This brought Joab to his door but did nothing to improve his relationship with this powerful general. Joab would one day thrust three spears through Absalom’s heart (18:14).

When Joab came Absalom made no apology for torching his crop. He more or less blamed Joab for bringing him from Geshur to Jerusalem. He told him to go to the king, asking why he refused to see him after bringing him back to Jerusalem. He demanded to see the king face to face whatever the consequences: ‘If I am guilty of anything, let him put me to death’ (14:32 NIV). He showed no repentance for murdering his brother. He was defiant in demanding either full pardon and restoration, or death. He would no doubt have had questions for David to answer at any face-to-face meeting, questions such as, how come his brother was not punished for raping his sister.

Joab knew a meeting between David and Absalom would not be easy, especially after getting a taste of Absalom’s arson, but agreed to take Absalom’s message to the king. The king agreed to a meeting with Absalom. When Absalom came, he bowed with his face to the ground before the king (14:33). Was this anything more than royal protocol? ‘Then the king kissed Absalom’ (14:33). With such a brief report of the meeting in this abrupt ending to the chapter, can we conclude anything more than ‘royal protocol’ again? The kiss was probably more formal than felt. Joab’s mediation was good as far as it went, but more was necessary, as the next chapter shows. How thankful we are that God has provided a mediator between sinners like us and Himself, whose face we would never see without the only mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Absalom’s rebellion** Text: 2Samuel 15:1-18

Politicians work hard to get people to vote for them. Sometimes they come up with policies that people like, but other times they resort to promises of more money in people’s pockets. Sometimes they actually put money in people’s pockets, as recently seen in Turkey, and as often seen in India. Usually only the ruling party can afford to buy votes in this way. Absalom could not afford to buy votes; there was no election in sight anyway! Instead, he came up with a clever scheme to steal the hearts of the people before launching a coup *de tat*. Clearly, the kiss of the king at their last face to face meeting did not point to any reconciliation between father and son, between king and crown prince (14:33). Our subheadings are: ‘Flattery gains a following’, ‘Followers called to Hebron’, and ‘Flight of King David’.

**1. Flattery gains a following**

Absalom was the third son of King David, and now the son next in line to the throne. But he had been ostracised by his father since he murdered his elder brother Amnon. David’s failure to deliver justice within his own family contributed to the frustration felt by Absalom. Absalom was a handsome fellow with a ‘swelled head’, so it seems. We know little about what was in his heart, but we now learn what was in his head. In politics and in every way of life, even in the church, we must try to discern what is in a person’s heart. We generally have no trouble learning what is in their head. Although their actual display of knowledge may be a sign of what is in their heart!

Absalom’s first act of rebellion was to provide himself with a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him (15:1). Chariots were popular with the Philistines but not in the hills of Israel; there is no record of David getting around in a chariot. Absalom saw this war-machine a symbol of prestige and power. Fifty men were not sufficient to launch a rebellion or coup, but it was a start.

How would Absalom increase his following? He came up with a clever idea; he would exploit an apparent weakness in his father’s administration. The ‘weakness’ demonstrated by David with regard to administering justice in his own family extended to the whole population, although in a different way. The people were not getting justice because the judge, the king was overwhelmed with cases; so Absalom observed, although the woman from Tekoa did not seem to have a problem in approaching David.

Absalom decided to intercept people as they came to the king with their cases to be settled. He would get up early and go to the city gate. As people came with their lawsuits for the king to give a just decision, Absalom called them aside and asked where they were from. After this friendly question, and presumably a question about their lawsuit, he told them that their case was valid and proper but that the king was not free to hear them, and that he had not appointed any deputy- apart from Absalom it would seem! As the people went away assured of the ‘rightness’ of their case, Absalom would quickly add, ‘Oh, that I were made judge in the land’ (15:4). He promised to solve all their problems, and that in a favourable manner, if they supported him. I wonder who taught Absalom politics- the devil?

Absalom’s clever politicking at the city gate included a warm welcome. Everyone knew he was the king’s son and bowed as they came towards him, thinking he was serving the king. Absalom was quick to take their hand to kiss as they bowed before him. If they were carrying a baby he would probably have held this also, as our politicians tend to do! After some years of endearing himself to the people in this way, ‘Absalom had stolen the hearts of the men of Israel’ (15:6). These words sound ominous, and are ominous in terms of Absalom’s rebellion.

David his father was a very popular king, although the scandal within the royal family may have lessened his popularity. His son sitting at the city gate endearing himself to the people did not improve David’s popularity. The hearts stolen by Absalom were hearts that once belonged to David his father. Absalom knew he would have to become more popular than his father if he was to overthrow the king. It would take time, but the time would come.

**2. Followers called to Hebron**

When Absalom decided the time had come for him to launch his coup, he asked the king’s permission to go to Hebron to pay a vow he had made to the Lord while in exile in Geshur (15:7, 8). Was this the truth? Most probably not, because there is no indication of Absalom ever wanting to serve anyone but himself. But David does not question his son regarding his vow and his need to go to Hebron at this time. ‘Go in peace’ he said to him, when peace was the last thing on Absalom’s mind. Hebron was the place of Absalom’s birth, and the place from which David began his rule, so it was strategic for Absalom as he planned his rebellion. Most translations of the Bible have Absalom launching his coup after four years rather than forty years, as we have in the NKJV; David’s only reigned for forty years (5:4).

Having stolen the hearts of the men of Israel, now was the time for Absalom to capitalise on all his political hard work. He sent spies into all the tribes of Israel to sound the trumpet and announce, ‘Absalom reigns in Hebron’ (15:10). From Jerusalem had come two hundred men, presumably men who knew Absalom but knew nothing about his evil plans (15:11). They thought they were joining him for a religious ceremony. The initial twenty had grown to this two hundred, a tenfold increase, and by the time they came from the various tribes the increase would have been over a hundred-fold.

One of the key defectors was Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counsellor from Giloh (15:12). Did Ahithophel go to Hebron innocently like the others? Ahithophel was in fact the grandfather of Bathsheba (23:34), so had reason to rejoice in David’s downfall. In Psalm 3, penned by David as he fled from Absalom, he laments that many had risen up against him, even men close to him. Absalom was the closet of course, but Ahithophel was his counsellor, his close advisor (cf. Ps 41:9).

**3. Flight of King David**

When an informant came to David telling him his son’s rebellion, David appears to have been taken by surprise (15:13). The message was simple: ‘The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom’. How could David have been so blind as not to see what Absalom had been up to the past four years, parading about in his chariot, politicking at the front gate and then pretending he needed to worship the Lord in Hebron? As a young man David was always a step ahead of King Saul who was trying to kill him, but as an old man he was a step behind his own son, Absalom. Giving him a name meaning ‘man of peace’ and sending him off to Hebron ‘in peace’ were grave mistakes on David’s part.

Most sons, thankfully, are loyal to their father, but not Absalom. He despised his father and could not wait to take the throne of Israel from him. Absalom’s knowledge of the Bible was scant; he was ignorant of the fifth commandment: ‘Honour your father and your mother… that your days may be long, and that it may well with you’ (Deut 5:16). How many sons and daughters have come under the condemnation of this commandment? Absalom certainly did, as we will see. But for now he seems to be successful in his rebellion.

It is interesting, and also instructive, that David decided to flee the city (15:14). Firstly, we note that he could no longer remain passive; he was forced to do something. Everyone will be forced to act one day, and even now as death hangs over our heads. We can remain as we are and die, or we can flee to the arms of Christ and live. If David had stayed in the city someone would have died, and it may have been him, although he was once a skilful warrior. David wanted to avoid death and the death of his son. He wanted to avoid bloodshed altogether (15:14). David’s ability to make decisions returned. He decided to commit himself and his ways into the hands of the Lord by fleeing the city.

As believers we must learn to commit our ways into the Lord’s hands. Let us not think we have to stand and fight, even if we are in the right. Children are given conflicting messages about dealing with bullies in the schoolyard. Stand and fight some adults tell them. Others tell them to run away and face the shame. We should tell them to commit their way to the Lord, who is able to put the shame upon the bully, or make him or her feel guilty for their behaviour. While the world speaks about shaming certain people, the Bible tells about a king who, rather than fight his enemy, took the shame upon himself. More than David, that king was Jesus, ‘Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 12:2).

Jesus showed us another way, the way of loving your neighbour and even your enemy, rather than hating and seeking revenge upon those who speak or act against you. Remember, ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay’ says the Lord (Rom 12:19). By all means speak to such a person, but then remember, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath’ (Prov 15:1).

Having learned that Absalom was plotting a coup, David hastily arranged to flee the city from which he ruled all Israel, and the city which was the centre of worship in Israel. He still had many loyal servants whom we will meet in due time, servants ready to do whatever the king commanded (15:15). David and his servants left the capital and were leaving the country. Before crossing the Kidron valley that runs north -south immediately east of Jerusalem, David stopped to let his servants go ahead. These servants were actually his bodyguard of elite foreign mercenaries. They included six hundred Philistines who had followed him from Gath, men more loyal than his own son (15:18).

For some reason David left ten women, concubines, behind in palace. The reason given is, ‘to keep the house’ (15:16). Remembering the prophetic words of Nathan (12:11), and knowing what lies ahead, a red flag is raised as we read this verse. What was David thinking? In the first place, these women were probably from Jerusalem. When David came to Jerusalem, he took concubines as well as wives from Jerusalem; they were Jebusites (5:13). Secondly, it would have been safer for women than men when Absalom took over the palace, or so David thought. The third reason he left ten concubines behind was that prophecy might be fulfilled, God sovereignly ordaining whatsoever comes to pass (Shorter Catechism Q 7).

Should David have been more attentive to the words of the prophet? As I have said before, ‘Who are we to judge?’ We have been learning from David’s example, both his faithfulness and obedience to God’s word, although latterly from his disobedience to the Lord’s commands. If we consider David to be a failure as a father, let us learn from him. Let us not fail to exercise discipline, loving discipline, and justice within our family. Being a father or mother requires more wisdom and prayer than running the country!

If we think David should have paid more heed to the prophecy of Nathan, then let us pay more heed to the prophecy of Scripture ourselves. Many prophesies have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ; these we must understand, and must believe in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Other prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. Let us know these also, and focus on them, because they will also be fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he returns to judge this world in righteousness.

**Encounters as David departs Jerusalem** Text: 2Samuel 15:19-16:14

‘Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statues’ (Ps 119:67, 68). These words are most applicable to the time in David’s life that we are reflecting on today. When his son Absalom rebelled and organised a coup, David fled the palace and the city from which he ruled Israel. David knew his son’s rebellion was partly his fault. Since his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, David had ‘gone into his shell’, and even turned away from the Lord.

Before this sin he was loved by the people of Israel, and feared by Israel’s enemies. He had brought the Ark of the Covenant up and put it in the tabernacle set up in the city; worship was re-established in Israel. His sin, and the consequences of his sin, left him ineffective as a father and a king. Although he repented when challenged by the prophet, he became passive, even impotent, as a father and as a king. He was not engaging in prayer or calling upon the prophet of God, but was listening to a wise woman from Tekoa!

David spent his early years on the run from King Saul, but even then, we did not see him barefoot and weeping (15:30). Of course, he was much older now, but sadly no wiser. Yet we sense a re-commitment to the Lord as ‘affliction’ at the hands of his son forces him to flee the palace for the wilderness. While his own son rises up against him, many remain loyal to him, especially foreigners. A man from the house of Saul takes opportunity to gloat over David’s downfall; a scene reflected in Psalm 7. If the Lord is powerful to humble a king, he is powerful to humble you and me. Our subheadings are: ‘Loyal foreigner, Levite and advisor’, ‘Opportunistic servant’, and ‘Cursing Shimei’.

**1a.Loyal foreigner**

When David heard from an informant that the ‘hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom’ (15:13), and that he was ready to march on the capital, David knew he had to act quickly. His days of doing nothing were over. Still, there is no mention of prayer or the prophet of God. David would have been able to defend the city but wanted to avoid more bloodshed within his family and in Israel, so he fled. He was again making decisions and taking action, and doing so in a hurry. The only people left behind in the palace were ten concubines (15:16). All David’s servants or royal guard passed before him as he stood at the gate. These were mostly foreign mercenaries, six hundred of them coming from the Philistine city of Gath- the Gittites.

The leader of the Gittites was man called Ittai, Ittai the Gittite (15:19). As he passed by David questioned him as to why he was going with him and not staying with ‘the king’ (15:19), as in Absalom; did David think this was the end of his reign? David tried to discourage Ittai, a refugee who had only recently joined David’s forces; he didn’t want him to become a refugee again. David gave him his blessing to return, ‘Mercy and truth to you’, but Ittai would not be dissuaded from following David. He took an oath in the name of Yahweh, and of the king, pledging to follow David even if it meant death; had he become a follower of Yahweh? David’s blessing was actually in covenant terms.

The loyalty of this foreigner stands in contrast to the disloyalty of his own son. Family blood ties are strong but covenant blood ties are even stronger; remember Jonathan. We also recall Ruth and her response to Naomi: ‘Where you go I will go… and your God will be my God’ (Ruth 1:16). David had no answer to such loyalty. Indeed, he must have been deeply touched by Ittai’s words, and actions. He told Ittai to go ahead and cross over the Kidron Valley that lay immediately to the east of Jerusalem. With Ittai were some six hundred men and their families. David soon followed all the people across the Kidron as they headed into the country. As the people watched they ‘wept with a loud voice’ (15:23), dismayed at what was happening to their king.

**1b.Loyal Levites**

Also fleeing the city before Absalom arrived were the Levites or priests, Zadok and Abiathar in particular. They had taken the Ark of the Covenant out of the tabernacle and set it down as the people crossed over from the city (15:24); a scene not unlike that of Joshua crossing the Jordan to come into Canaan (Josh 3:14-17), except David was leaving! We are also reminded of the time when the people took the ark of God with them to battle, but far from helping them defeat the Philistines, the ark was captured (1Sam 4:17).

The ark symbolised God’s presence among his people but was not to be manipulated like a pagan idol. It belonged in the most holy place of the tabernacle, something David understood. Just because he was leaving Jerusalem did not mean the Lord was leaving. The nation of Israel was bigger than David! All political leaders, and church leaders, should remember this; the church of God is bigger than any individual minister or elder.

David told Zadok to take the ark of God back into the city as he committed his future into the hands of the Lord. Realising that his future was in the hands of the Lord, David humbled himself before the Lord. If the Lord was pleased with him, he would bring him back, but if not then let the Lord be praised. The Lord always does what is best for those whom he calls and who love him, be they prince or pauper (Rom 8:28). While sending Zadok back with the ark of God, David said, ‘Are you not a seer?’ (15:27). A seer was a prophet but the priest with the Urim and Thummin was like a prophet. There may also be a play on words here- Zadok and Abiathar were to be the eyes and ears of David back in Jerusalem, sending him updates through their sons (15:28). Information about the enemy and his tactics is critical in any battle, not least in our spiritual battle against Satan. By his word and his Spirit, the Lord informs us of Satan’s tactics. So listen to God’s word or you will unprepared for the attacks of Satan upon your soul.

Having crossed the Kidron, David continued up the Mount of Olives, surrounded by many loyal servants. The picture is one of despair, of helplessness and humility. David and his servants went up weeping and with their heads covered like mourners at a funeral, and he was barefoot (15:30). The king of Israel wearing no shoes- what humility! Many years later the ‘greater Son of David’ would be led out to the city stripped of his robes and wearing a crown of thorns, with the women of Jerusalem weeping and lamenting him (Luke 23:27,28). The night before he would be on the Mount of Olives praying to his Father in heaven with sweat like ‘great drops of blood’ (Luke 23:44).

David cried out to the Lord in prayer as he went up the mountain (15:31). It has been a long time since we heard David in prayer! Affliction was having its effect, its divinely designed and desired effect; David was again praying to the Lord. David was told that Ahithophel, his former advisor, had betrayed him. He asked the Lord to turn Ahithophel’s advice into foolishness (15:31). Realising he could do nothing, David asked the Lord for help. What he wanted was something he could not do anyway, namely turn a man’s advice into foolishness. We will see how the Lord answered David’s prayer in the next chapter. Do you see the Lord’s answering your prayers? Are you not praying that the Lord confuse the wicked today? Do you not think he is answering such prayers when you see wicked social movements and political campaigns self-destruct?

**1c. Loyal Hushai**

On the top of the mountain was a place where people paused to worship God. At this place David was met by Hushai, Hushai the Archite (15:32). He came in mourning to meet David. He is called ‘David’s friend’ (15:37), a loyal friend and counsellor as it turns out, from a place down from Bethel (Josh 16:2). His name in Hebrew sounds like the word for ‘quick’ or ‘hasten’; one writer calls him ‘Speedy the Prolonger’. His advice will prolong Absalom’s pursuit of David.

David encouraged Hushai to return to Jerusalem rather than flee with him. Just how he would be a burden is not clear, but David clearly saw how he could help him by returning to Jerusalem and showing loyalty to Absalom. Servants of the king normally showed allegiance to the kings’ son, although Absalom could hardly expect any such transfer of allegiance; Ahithophel was a special case. So David asked Hushai to return to the city, along with Zadok and Abiathar the priests. He should show allegiance to Absalom and hopefully give advice to counter that of Ahithophel (15:34). Again he, like the two priests, had the two sons of the priests to send to David whenever they had intelligence to share (15:36). Hushai got back to Jerusalem just before Absalom arrived.

**2. Opportunistic servant**

As David fled the city he was encouraged by various servants or officials, namely Ittai the Gittite who vowed never to leave David, Zadok and Abiathar who David sent back with the Ark of the Covenant, and Hushai the Archite, an advisor who David also sent back. David crossed the Kidron and went up the Mount of Olives barefoot and weeping. The shock of his son’s rebellion, and of leaving his home and his throne, had the positive effect of finding out who were his true friends, and of driving David back into the arms of the Lord. Another servant called Ziba appears more opportunistic than loyal.

We have met Ziba before (9:2). As a servant of King Saul, he ended up looking after the crippled son of Jonathan called Mephibosheth. When David had established peace in the land, and before he lusted after Bathsheba, he sought out Saul’s grandson and brought him to live and eat with him in his palace. David told Ziba to work the land inherited by Mephibosheth. Did Ziba want a bit more recognition than this? Ziba appears on the scene as David passes the top of the mountain. He had come to meet David with a couple of donkeys loaded down with supplies- bread, figs, raisins, and a skin of wine (16:1). David was surprised, and maybe a bit suspicious; after all, Ziba was Saul’s servant. But Ziba assured David everything he had was for David, and David accepted the gifts with gratitude.

David went on to ask about Mephibosheth. Ziba told David that he was staying in Jerusalem; he was a cripple after all! He also told David that Mephibosheth stayed because he was hoping the people would recognise him as the rightful heir in the line of Saul (16:3). Subsequent events, and words from Mephibosheth himself, cast doubt on the veracity of Ziba’s information. But David believed him, and tells Ziba, ‘all that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours’ (16:4). Ziba was overjoyed as he bowed before David declaring, ‘My lord, O king!’ (16:4); we didn’t see such exuberance when he was told to look after the farm for Mephibosheth (9:11).

**3. Cursing Shimei**

Going down the other side of the mountain, David and his fellow refuges came to Bahurim where he was met by a man from the house of Saul called Shimei. Shimei came out cursing David and throwing stones at him. Talk about kicking a man when he is down! Even though David was ‘down’ he was not ‘out’; he had Ittai’s six hundred Gittites around him, not to mention his regular army led by Joab, or in this case his brother Abishai. Shimei called David a bloodthirsty man and ‘son of Belial’ (16:7). He saw David’s troubles as being God’s repayment for all the blood that he had shed in taking the throne from Saul’s family. In truth David had not killed anyone from Saul’s family in ascending to the throne.

Despite Shimei’s accusations and violent anger, David does not confront him. He actually stops Abishai from taking off his head, and suggests that Shimei is cursing him because the Lord told him to (16:10, 11). Have you ever thought the Lord might be speaking to you when someone criticises or even curses you? This sounds a lot like the ‘old’, as in young David who refused to harm Saul because, ‘vengeance belongs to the Lord’. David asks that the Lord look upon him and his affliction, and repay him with good in place of cursing (16:12). Psalm 7 reflects David’s prayer at this time.

David’s mercy towards Shimei did not change his behaviour. Did he know how close he came to losing his head! As David went down the road towards the Jordan, Shimei kept up his cursing and throwing stones. It was a different story when later on David headed back to Jerusalem. Shimei confessed his sin and again David stopped Abishai from exacting revenge (19:23). How gracious of David! How gracious of Jesus who forgives your sin when you repent and seek forgiveness.

**Absalom enters Jerusalem** Text: 2Samuel 16:15-17:29

The reading in our family prayer the other night was about Solomon becoming king. When Solomon became king he didn’t ask for riches or honour but for wisdom, heavenly wisdom. A king needs wisdom even more than he needs an army, as shown by the story we have just read. David’s son Absalom conspired against him and marched on the capital. When David was informed, he fled the palace and the city. We have watched him cross the Kidron Valley and go over the Mount of Olives as he fled towards the wilderness. He and those with him, including women and children, were weary as night fell, so they camped by the Jordan.

Absalom and his men reached Jerusalem shortly after David left, so there was no bloodshed. Hushai the Archite, David’s friend, arrived back in Jerusalem just before Absalom arrived. David had left ten concubines behind to keep the palace (15:16). With Absalom was ‘Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counsellor’ (15:12). He was no longer David’s counsellor because he had joined Absalom’s rebellion. His defection may be related to his being the grandfather of Bathsheba.

The focus of today’s narrative returns to Jerusalem, to Absalom and the two advisors he has acquired. Our subheadings are: ‘Advice of Ahithophel’, ‘Advice of Hushai’, and, ‘David escapes across the Jordan’.

**1. Advice of Ahithophel**

Absalom entered an almost empty city. David had fled, leaving behind ten women in the palace. David had sent the two priests, Zadok and Abiathar, back to the city with the Ark of the Covenant, along with Hushai the Archite. He told Hushai to serve Absalom, or at least pretend to do so. He wanted Hushai to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel (15:34). David had prayed, asking the Lord to do the same thing, defeat the advice of Ahithophel; which is what this passage is all about.

We see Absalom getting advice from two skilled advisors, Ahithophel and Hushai, but in the end, we are told, it was the Lord who determined the outcome, that he might ‘bring disaster on Absalom’ (17:14). We are reminded of Pilate desperately seeking advice concerning a prisoner called Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. In the end he made a foolish decision, just like Absalom, because the Lord was overruling in the affairs of men to bring about his own ‘determined purpose’ (Acts 2:23).

Absalom was surprised when Hushai came up to him saying, ‘Long live the king!’ (16:16). He knew Hushai was David’s friend, so why was he being disloyal. As David’s son, Absalom knew all about disloyalty! But hearing the words, ‘Long live the king!’ Absalom was flattered; we know him to be a proud and arrogant man. Hushai did not say, ‘Long live King Absalom’ but this is how Absalom understood his words. Hushai let Absalom believe this as he pledged loyalty to the king ‘whom the Lord and the people choose’ (16:18); David of course, was the anointed of the Lord!

David had told Hushai to pledge loyalty to his son, which is what Hushai does in verse 19; but again Hushai is referring to the legitimate passing of the crown from father to son, not to a son staging a coup. His words in the Hebrew can mean that he will continue serving the father while in the presence of the son! Blinded by pride and ego, Absalom thinks Hushai has defected to him, but Hushai’s words were far from clear, and deliberately so. Pride and inflated ego has led many a leader to misunderstand his status in society or in the church, and ultimately to his fall.

Absalom, with his band of rebels, had captured Jerusalem ‘without firing a shot’ as we say. What would be his next move? David was still alive, and Absalom may have had intelligence as to his whereabouts. As the legitimate king, David would pose a threat as long as he was alive. Absalom turned to Ahithophel for advice concerning his next move.

Ahithophel first advised Absalom to go and lie with his father’s concubines. This would humiliate David, not to mention the women, and make Absalom a stench in the nostrils of his father. You will recall the offence felt by Ishbosheth when he thought Abner had slept with Saul’s concubine (3:7). Taking a king’s harem was the ultimate mark of defeat and shame in those days. So a tent was set up on the roof of the palace and Absalom sexually assaulted each of the ten concubines left by David ‘in the sight of all Israel’ (16:22). This was the advice of Ahithophel who had completely thrown his lot in with Absalom. We are told that Ahithophel’s advice was like an oracle of God in those days (16:23) - but not for much longer! We know that this was God in his sovereignty working out his own words and purposes. It was the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Nathan when he spoke to David after his adultery with Bathsheba (12:11).

Ahithophel gave further advice to Absalom. He told Absalom to let him choose twelve thousand men and chase after David that very night. He reckoned that David would be exhausted and afraid, and so easily overcome. The coup was successful so far, but many were still with David. Ahithophel reckoned he could take David out and have the people come over to Absalom. The possibility of avoiding a deadly civil war was attractive to Absalom and the elders of Israel (17:1-4), but he wanted a second opinion. Why Ahithophel wanted to lead this attack on David himself is not clear. As the new king, Absalom needed to prove himself on the battlefield as well as in the bedroom. Maybe Ahithophel thought Absalom was not up to killing his own father, or maybe he was intent on his own vengeful killing David. Despite Ahithophel’s reputation for sound advice, Absalom decided to ask Hushai for advice now that he had become his servant.

**2. Advice of Hushai**

When Absalom called Hushai, he relayed the advice just given by Ahithophel and asked for his opinion (17:5, 6). Hushai again showed wisdom and a deft use of words in answering Absalom. He told him that Ahithophel’s advice was ‘not good at this time’ (17:7); his advice was usually good but not this time. A master of metaphor and simile, Hushai goes on to give his own advice, advice contrary to that of Ahithophel. Everyone knows the danger posed by a bear robbed of her cubs, which is just what David would be like having been robbed of his throne (17:8). David was a warrior and would not be so foolish as to camp with the people, as suggested by Ahithophel. Hushai pictured David hiding in a pit. If Ahithophel’s men attacked there would be a battle, and men, including Absalom’s men, would get killed, the very thing Ahithophel said he would avoid (17:9). Hushai goes on to compare David to a lion, a warrior who strikes fear into the heart of any who dare come against him.

Having undermined the advice given by Ahithophel, the very task David sent him to do, Hushai goes on to give his own advice by way of again flattering Absalom; proud hearts are vulnerable to flattery. Hushai continues with further figures of speech, including hyperbole, suggesting Absalom’s army could put a rope around the city where David was hiding and drag it into the river (17:13). Hushai advised Absalom to gather a huge army from all over Israel before attacking David, an army ‘like the sand of the sea’ that Absalom himself would lead (17:11). This might take time but not even David would be able stand against such force. No matter where he fled, David and those with him would be defeated, with no one left alive (17:12).

After a brief consultation, Absalom and the elders chose to follow the advice of Hushai rather than Ahithophel. Ahithophel’s advice was best, but in ‘working all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose’ (Rom 8:28), the Lord purposed to defeat the good advice of Ahithophel. He did so that he might destroy Absalom for his rebellion against the Lord’s anointed king (17:14).

Ahithophel was distressed that his advice was rejected. In ordaining this rejection, the Lord may have been ordaining Ahithophel’s condemnation for joining Absalom’s rebellion. Ahithophel knew that when David returned he would be condemned as a traitor. So he saddled his donkey and went home. He put his house in order and hanged himself (17:23). Ahithophel joined King Saul, and later Judas Iscariot, as one of few suicides in the Bible. Suicide is never heroic. All these men were guilty of rebellion against the Lord’s anointed, a sin for which there is no forgiveness.

**3. David escapes across the Jordan**

Hushai moved quickly to get a message to David along the line of communication set up by David. If he had heard about Ahithophel’s advice being rejected he was not sure that this would remain the case. David must be warned to flee across the Jordan that very night. Hushai told Zadok and Abiathar, who told their sons to take this message to David at once. Another intermediary was needed to get the message out of the city and to the boys. The city gate was closely guarded so these boys stayed just outside the wall at En Rogel, a spring in the Kidron Valley (17:17). Even then the two boys were spotted by another boy, who went and told Absalom.

A couple in the town of Bahurim gave shelter to these two boys (17:18). The stone-throwing Shimei was from Bahurim, but thankfully not all the inhabitants were like him. This couple must have supported David because they took the risk of hiding these two boy spies. They put them in a dry well and the woman covered the well with a cloth. She spread grain on this cloth as if to dry it (17:19). In India villagers spread grain on sealed roads to dry. I was reluctant to drive over it but cars and trucks just drove over the grain. The scene at Bahurim is reminiscent of Rahab hiding Joshua’s spies. When Absalom’s servant came looking for the boys the woman told them that they had ‘gone over the water brook’, so they gave up their search and returned to Absalom (17:20).

When ‘the coast was clear’ as we say, the boys climbed out of the well and ran off to find David. When David got Hushai’s message he and all those with him got up from their rest and made their way across the Jordan River. By morning no one was left on the western side of the Jordan. They had crossed over into Gilead, still Israelite territory but near to where the Ammonites lived. David moved into the city of Mahanaim, known to us as the city from which Ishbosheth briefly ruled Israel.

David was helped by Shobi from the Ammonite city of Rabbah; he was probably their king but did not think to rebel against David. Machir, who took the crippled son of Jonathan into his house, also came to David’s aid (17:27). Finally, Barzillai the Gileadite came to help David. He must have been a rich man because he brought bedding and utensils, as well as a great variety of food for David and his followers. David greatly appreciated this help after their long and tiring journey.

It was not long before Absalom and his army had crossed the Jordan and came to Mahanaim. Absalom had made Amasa captain of his army. Amasa was a nephew of David’s, and cousin to Absalom and Joab; Joab was till with David.

The advice of Hushai was instrumental in allowing David to escape the clutches of his rebellious son, but in all the affairs of men it is the Lord who overrules for his purposes and for his glory. I trust you are able to see the Lord’s overruling in all the decisions you make- decisions made with prayer I hope, but not necessarily! I trust you can see the Lord’s overruling in affairs that are out of your hands, affairs in your own life, in the life of your family, your church, and all the nations.

**Absalom killed and David grieves** Text: 2Samuel 18:1-19:8

When David’s son, Absalom, led a *coup d’etat* and marched on the capital, Jerusalem, David fled the city, so there was no bloodshed; it was a bloodless coup. But David was not without his supporters. He had a mercenary force of six hundred Gittites, and Joab, his army commander with him. In the sovereign purposes of God, Ahithophel’s ‘good advice’ to Absalom was rejected, allowing David to escape to the city of Mahanaim, and resulting in Ahithophel committing suicide. Absalom believed his coup was successful, but David, with his supporters and warriors, posed a threat to him establishing himself as king. So Absalom put Amasa, Joab’s cousin, in charge of his army and went off the deal with David.

Civil war in Israel was inevitable. Most wars have winners but not a civil war, especially not one between relatives, and especially not one between father and son. Yet even in this tragic situation brought about by sinful men, the Lord overrules for his sovereign purposes. The Lord punishes wicked and rebellious men who refuse to repent, sometimes cutting short their earthly life; we have already seen a betrayer committing suicide. Today we will see a rebellious son killed in battle.

God gave commands through Moses, commands that carry consequences when not obeyed. He who strikes his father or mother, or even curses his father or mother, shall surely be put to death (Exod 21:15, 17). In Israel judicial execution was by stoning; Absalom ended up under a huge pile of stones! Adultery also carried the death penalty, but David repented and, in the Lord’s mercy, escaped this penalty, but he did not escape other consequences of his sin. His infant son died when struck by the Lord (12:14) and his eldest son died when struck by his brother Absalom. David, as king, failed to execute justice, probably because of a guilty conscience. We see his guilty conscience come to the fore again in the context of this civil war in Israel. Let us look at the account of this civil war under four subheadings: ‘Defeat of Absalom and his rebels’, ‘Death of Absalom’, ‘Death of Absalom reported’, and ‘David’s grief and guilt’.

**1. Defeat of Absalom and his rebels**

David and his servants/warriors, along with their families, fled to the city of Mahanaim in Gilead. They were exhausted and hungry but a rich man called Barzillai kindly supplied them with bedding, utensils and plenty of food. By the time Absalom arrived with his ‘citizen’s army’, David had organised his men into three units, one led by the seasoned fighter Joab, another by his brother Abishai, and a third led by Ittai the Gittite, a loyal leader of six hundred mercenaries from Gath (18:2, cf. 15:18,19). There is no record of Absalom, or even Amasa, his army commander, having been involved in a battle before this time.

David was a seasoned military leader and he wanted to lead his well-organised forces into battle against Absalom and all the Israelites who had joined his rebellion. But the people advised David to stay in the city. David was getting old, but they wanted him kept out of this battle because of conflicted feelings towards his son. We might also remember the ‘good advice’ of Ahithophel, which was to target David, take him out, and see all the people come over to the rebels. For this reason they said to David, ‘You are worth ten thousand of us now’ (18:3). David had fought the Philistine giant, Goliath, and won, but fighting his own son would be a different matter. We find no reference to prayer or seeking the will of God in this story. David agreed to the people’s demand to stay in the city while his men went to battle. He lived to regret the last time he stayed behind, and might do so again.

While not exactly a condition of staying behind, David did demand of his military leaders, Joab, Abishai and Ittai, that they, ‘Deal gently with the young man Absalom for my sake’ (18:5). All the men leaving the city to confront Absalom heard David give this order. The battle was engaged in the ‘woods of Ephraim’ (18:6). On the northern side of the Jabok river, not far from Mahanaim, was a forest, a thick forest so it seems. Jungle warfare is very difficult and dangerous, as Australian soldiers who fought the Japanese in New Guinea would have told you. The forest or jungle itself claims many lives.

This is what happened in this civil war between David and Absalom. Low branches, and pits scattered through the woods proved to be deadly, such that ‘the woods devoured more people that day than the sword’ (18:8). The woods may also have harboured bears and lions. This is all we are told about the battle, apart from the fact that twenty thousand men lay dead, before Joab blew the trumpet to call off the battle (18:7, 16). David’s men defeated the forces of Israel led by Absalom.

**2. Death of Absalom**

Absalom was leading his rebel army in this battle in the woods of Ephraim. As their self-appointed leader and king, he was riding on a mule, probably dressed in royal regalia (18:9). As he rode under a terebinth tree his head got caught in a branch, and when his mule went on, he was left hanging in the tree (18:9). Many picture Absalom hanging by his long hair, although the text does actually say this; but we were told that Absalom was proud of thick head of hair (14:26).

One of David’s men saw Absalom hanging from a tree, ‘hanging between heaven and earth’, and went to tell Joab (18:9, 10). Joab scolded him for not striking him dead then and there: ‘What! You just saw him and did nothing’?’ (18:11). Joab understood that Absalom, like David, was critical to the outcome of this civil war. He had in the past got Absalom a meeting with his father in the hope that they would be reconciled; but burning Joab’s barley crop was not a wise thing to do! Joab was driven by self-interest and could be violent.

Joab told the man who found Absalom hanging in the tree he would have rewarded him if he had struck Absalom, and, we assume, brought his severed head to Joab (18:11); was this a promise Joab had made? This man would have nothing to do with Joab’s promise of a reward. He bravely told Joab that no amount of money would make him disobey the king’s command to spare Absalom. Besides, he knew what David might do to such a person, and he knew Joab would not stand by him when it came to the crunch (18:12, 13). This loyal servant stands in contrast to the ruthless and self-serving Joab.

Joab did not want to hear any more reasoning or talk about obedience. He knew what had to be done to stop the war. He took three spears and ‘thrust them through Absalom’s heart’ or chest (18:14). The spears did not kill Absalom immediately because we read that ten of Joab’s armour bearers came and struck Absalom and killed him, probably after cutting him down from the tree. Even so, the words of Deuteronomy 21:23 come to mind: ‘He who is hanged is accused of God’. With Absalom dead, Joab blew the trumpet or ram’s horn to call off the battle, at least for his men. The men of Israel would have realised what had happened so fled to their tents, and eventually back to their homes in Israel.

Absalom’s time as king of Israel was very brief; he was never anointed king anyway. It ended with his brutal death and ignominious burial, the burial of an enemy or criminal rather than a ruler (Josh 8:29). Joab and his men simply threw Absalom’s corpse into a pit and covered it with stones, lots of stones (18:17). This pile of stones mocked the monument Absalom had already built to himself in the King’s Valley (18:18); not even David set up a monument to himself! Absalom said he had no son to continue his name; the three sons previously referred to, along with his daughter Tamar, must have died (14:27). Still today, some men want to be remembered by earthly monuments of some sort rather than through god-fearing children. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, our aim is to be remembered by the Lord in his Book of Life, and seek a heavenly reward in Christ Jesus.

**3. David hears of Absalom’s death**

The young man Ahimaaz suddenly appears and pleads with Joab to send him to David with news that David’s enemies have been defeated (18:19). But Joab was worried what David might do to the person telling him that his son was dead, and with good reason- remember the man who told him Saul was dead, and also Ishbotheth (4:10-12)! So Joab called a Cushite, a man from Ethiopia, to go and tell the king what he had seen (18:20, 21). Ahimaaz persisted until Joab let him go. Ahimaaz was athletic, and by running around the woods reached the city before the Cushite.

A watchman at the gate into Mahanaim saw Ahimaaz running towards the city and told David, who was waiting at the gate for news (18:24-27). He recognised the single runner as Ahimaaz, so David assumed he had good news; if all his men were running towards the gate it would not have been good news! When the Cushite was also spotted, David still thought he was bringing good news. Ahimaaz told David, ‘All is well!’, as he bowed before his king; the enemy had been defeated. When David asked if ‘the young man Absalom is safe’, Ahimaaz dodged the question; all he had seen was ‘a great tumult’ (18:29). When the Cushite arrived he was asked the same question by David. He was also indirect in his answer but indicated that the ‘young man’ Absalom had suffered the fate all men who rise up to harm David should suffer (18:32).

**4. David’s grief and guilt**

‘O my son Absalom- my son, my son Absalom’. These words in verse 33, repeated in verse 4 of the next chapter, say it all regarding the grief that came upon David when told of Absalom’s death. The text says he was ‘deeply moved’ and went into the watchtower and wept (18:33). David had commanded his men to deal gently with the young man Absalom for his sake, but Joab was not having anything of this ‘dealing gently’ with a traitor and coup leader in Israel, even if he was David’s ‘young man’.

David was conflicted, and we might have some sympathy for him; after all, a son is a son even if he is a criminal or traitor. But this was the very attitude that landed David in the predicament he was in; he failed to exercise justice when Absalom murdered Amnon, and failed to exercise justice when Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. David was still letting his feelings get in the way of justice. Guilt from his own sin was probably clouding his judgment. He felt responsible for the tragedy striking his family- ‘if only I had died in your place!’ (18:33).

David had more than the loss of his son to consider; he was king of Israel! Thousands of men had risked their lives in defending David against his treacherous son. Joab reminded David of these men, men now quietly slipping back into the city while David wept for the man who had attacked them. Joab gave David an ultimatum: stop the weeping and mourning, and welcome his soldiers returning in victory or he will have no soldiers (19:7). He must stop loving his enemies, even his own flesh and blood, and hating his friends, men ready to die for him (19:6).

Favouritism is condemned in the Bible (Deut 1:17, James 2:9). Favouritism towards relatives in bestowing offices is called ‘nepotism’. This is a sin that has brought ruination to many businesses and churches. The Christian Institute in which I taught while in India was guilty of nepotism, as were many churches. People think the rules about office bearers in our church are too strict, but take a look at churches that have no such rules, churches where sons, and daughters, take over church leadership from their father, even when not qualified, and without any questions asked. It is natural to favour family members, sinfully natural! Let David’s behaviour towards his son Absalom be a lesson to all in this regard!

**David brought back to Jerusalem** Text: 2Samuel 19:9-43

Some years go an elder was brought before a church court to answer questions about his public behaviour. One man on the court was insistent that he admit his sin and repent; the elder was removed from his office in the church. Years later the man insisting that this elder admit his sin and repent was asked to do the same thing in the same court. He was similarly removed as an office-bearer in the church.

Jesus said, ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ (Mat 7:1). These words are often misused to claim that we have no right to judge anyone, but they are simply a warning to be slow and careful in making any judgment, taking note of the plank that is in your own eye. Jesus used the word, ‘hypocrite’, telling us to remove the plank in our own eye before focusing on the speck in our brother’s eye.

When we first met David he was a godly and brave boy. He was chosen by the Lord and anointed as king. He was severely tested as Saul chased him, trying to kill him; David refused to harm the Lord’s anointed, King Saul. David became king of Israel in Hebron and then in Jerusalem. He was from the tribe of Judah while Saul from Benjamin. There were twelve tribes in all. David was a good king who, with God’s help, defeated the enemies of Israel and established worship in Jerusalem.

But everything changed that fateful day when, while idle and roaming on the roof of the palace he saw Bathsheba bathing, and committed adultery with her. The Lord forgave his sin but he had to live with consequences that came from that sin. While the Lord struck the child born of his adultery, the other consequences stemmed largely from his sense of guilt and inadequacy in making decisions, particular decisions and justice relating to his own family. We have previously noted David’s failure to consult the Lord after his sin, although he did pray for the Lord to overturn to advice of Ahithophel.

When David’s son conspired against him, David fled the palace, thereby avoiding bloodshed. But Absalom pursued him across the Jordan before being killed in the brief but bloody civil war. Actually, Joab killed the defenceless Absalom in direct disobedience to David’s command. The king’s palace that David had fled, leaving ten concubines behind, was briefly occupied by Absalom but was now deserted. The land was in limbo; it was without an incumbent king.

While David fled to avoid bloodshed involving his treacherous son, there was a lot of bloodshed anyway, and Absalom was also dead (18:7, 15). People were asking why their king had so quickly deserted them, a man who had led the armies of Israel in victory over all their enemies, foreign enemies. Here in chapter 19 we see David returning to Jerusalem and to his throne. But is he the same man who fled, and more to the point, the same man who ruled Israel before his sin? Our subheading are: ‘Politics but no prayer’, ‘Prostrating, praise and parting loyalty’, and, ‘Partisanship in Israel’.

**1. Politics but no prayer**

Remember we said that there were no winners in a civil war. In Israel the treacherous son of the king was dead and the king was mourning for his son. The land was in limbo, left without a king. As a federation of twelve tribes, Israel needed strong leadership. Such leadership was lacking at this time and the tribes started arguing about the future. David was still alive and many wanted him back. They remembered the ‘good old days’ when David defeated the Philistines and all other enemies; maybe they worried that the Philistines might step into this power vacuum in Israel. But when David failed to stand up to Absalom some threw their lot in with Absalom. Now he was dead, what would they do?

A call to bring David back started to be heard from around Israel (19:10). But David heard nothing from Jerusalem and his own tribe of Judah. He called on the priests, Zadok and Abiathar, to speak to the elders of Israel: ‘Why are you the last to bring the king back’ (19:11, 12). Many elders had sided with Absalom so probably feared reprisal at the hand of David and Joab. Kings do not like traitors and in those days killed them; Putin and others do the same today!

David the politician moved quickly to allay fears of retaliation by appointing Amasa to replace Joab as his army general. Amasa was his own flesh and blood (19:13), but had been Absalom’s general, so clearly David was forgiving him. David was also unhappy with Joab who kept challenging his authority as king. It was a politically astute move, but did David or Amasa realise Amasa was being given a poisoned chalice! The fears of the men of Judah were relieved, and as one voice they called for David to return to Jerusalem with all his servants (19:14).

**2. Prostrating, praise, and parting loyalty**

This subheading points to three people who feature in David’s return to Jerusalem, to his crossing of the Jordan from east to west. They are all men who featured in his crossing in the other direction, from west to east, as he fled Jerusalem just days or weeks before. The people of Judah called for David to return, and they came down to the Jordan, to the town of Gilgal, to welcome him back (19:15).

Within this welcoming gathering was a man called Shimei, from the tribe of Benjamin. This man had more to fear from David’s return than most. You will recall Shimei cursing David and throwing stones at him as he passed through Shimei’s home town of Bahurim (16:6-8). Abishai, Joab’s brother, wanted to kill Shimei at that time and still wanted to remove his head (19:21). But David again stopped this violent brother of violent Joab. David demonstrated a rare show of decisiveness and authority in reprimanding Abishai, and indirectly Joab (19:22).

Shimei hurried to see David and show sincere repentance for his previous behaviour; when you need to repent it is best to move quickly as Shimei did. He fell prostrate before David pleading forgiveness for what he had done. He said, ‘I have sinned’ (19:20). He wanted David to forgive and forget what he had done. It took a lot of courage for this man to come before David, to come as the first of ‘all the house of Joseph’ (19:20); Shimei was from Benjamin, a small tribe, but joined with the large tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh rather than Judah.

David was glad to be heading back to Jerusalem. He did not want to engage in reprisals that day, so swore to Shimei, ‘You shall not die’ (19:23). It took a lot of grace for David to forgive this man who cursed him. Maybe David felt guilt for his own sin and remembered God’s forgiveness. But David never forgot how Shimei cursed him that day he fled Jerusalem, and although promising not to kill him, David did instruct his son Solomon to, ‘Bring his grey hair down to the grave with blood’ (1Kings 2:9).

Also there to meet David as he returned was Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth ate at the king’s table but did not flee with the king. His servant, Ziba, told David that Mephibosheth, Saul’s grandson, was hoping the kingdom would be restored to him (16:3). But Mephibosheth had a different story to tell when he met David returning to Jerusalem. He said Ziba had doubled-crossed him, saying he would saddle him a donkey but left without him; he also slandered him before David, as just mentioned. David believed Ziba at the time and gave him all the farm that Mephibosheth inherited, but now he did not know who to believe. Hastily David divided the farm between them, the master and the servant (19:29).

Mephibosheth was full of praise for David, describing him as, ‘like an angel of God’ (19:27). But more than words, Mephibosheth demonstrated loyalty to David in his looks and behaviour. His long hair and fingernails, and his dirty clothes, were evidence of mourning, not of a readiness to rule. Moreover, telling David to give all the farm to Ziba showed he was just happy to see David back (19:24,30). Solomon would be called upon to decide which of two women was telling the truth with regard to a baby, and did so with wisdom that his father David was not demonstrating.

The third and last of the men to greet David on his return was Barzillai the Gileadite (19:31). In fact, he was not greeting David but came to wish him well as he returned from Gilead to Judah. David urged him to come and live in the palace because he had been so kind and helpful to David in his time of need. But Barzillai was old, eighty years old, and his faculties were fading. Palace life was not for him. He wanted to go to his own home and die there.

Barzillai suggested that David take Chimham, probably his own son, in his place, and David agreed. So David and his loyal friend, Barzillai, parted with a kiss and a blessing, and then David crossed over the Jordan. The Hebrew language is not clear, but it is unlikely that Barzillai crossed the river; and the parting probably occurred before the meeting with Shimei and Mephibosheth, at Gilgal and Jerusalem respectively. Chimham crossed the Jordan with David and presumably went to live in the palace. If he was as loyal as Barzillai, David would have counted him a blessing. He was otherwise surrounded by men like Shimei, Mephibosheth, and Ziba, not to mention Joab and Abishai!

**3. Partisanship in Israel**

All the people of Judah and half the people of Israel escorted David from the Jordan to Jerusalem (19:40). The rest of Israel showed up afterwards it seems, and started complaining against the men of Judah. The men of Israel were the first to call for David to be brought back, but the men of Judah stepped forward to bring him back. The men of Israel felt sidelined, and there is nothing like being sidelined or overlooked to stir up anger in a person or a group.

A wise king would have acted quickly to quell such feelings and unite the people but David did nothing. The men of Judah made things worse by claiming David as a ‘close relative’, although they denied any favouritism from the king (19:24). As we just said, David did nothing to stop this bickering, and nor did he pray. When people are in dispute it is always good to bring them before the Lord in prayer.

The division between Judah, including Simeon, and the other ten tribes in the north continued to grow. We know that after some years, in the time of King Rehoboam, the kingdom of Israel was actually split in two. The seeds of this division are seen here in the return of David as king of all Israel. The men of Judah claimed David as their close relative. The men of Israel claimed they had ten shares in the king and therefore more right to David. A bitter dispute arose on the day they should all have been rejoicing in having David back as their king.

How often does it happen that at a time of celebration and happiness, at a wedding for example, a family dispute erupts? Even in the church when we should all be rejoicing in our Lord Jesus Christ and his grace towards us, bitter disputes can harm and even break the fellowship, fellowship between brothers and sisters in the Lord. Pray that leaders, and all in our church, will be doing their utmost to maintain unity in spirit and truth.

**David faces another rebellion** Text: 2Samuel 20

Following his sins of adultery and murder, David faced troubles within his own house. The Lord forgave his sin but because of ongoing guilt and shame, and/or a failure to exercise discipline and justice within his family, a discontented son, a son guilty of murder, conspired against David. Up to this point in his reign David had been as strong and wise king, defeating enemies all around. The nation was united behind him even though the first king was from Benjamin and David was from the tribe of Judah. There was a brief attempt to maintain the royal line of Saul but David was the Lord’s anointed. In a brief summary of his administration before he sinned, it is written that David ‘administered judgment and justice to all his people’ (8:15). These words are not found in the description of his administration found at the end of chapter 20.

When David fled Jerusalem rather than stand up to the rebellion led by his son, he left ten concubines behind to keep the palace. It was prophesied that his wives or concubines would be violated ‘in the sight of the sun’, and this is what happened when Absalom marched into Jerusalem and took over the palace; he lay with these ten concubines on the roof of the palace (12:11, 16:22). This violation of the king’s concubines marked the overthrow of the king. Such brutality towards women is still a tragic mark of most wars.

When David returned to Jerusalem he put these women into seclusion, treating them as widows (20:3). This seems to be a harsh response on the part of David when the women were victims of violence in war. But remembering that his son’s violation of these women was a mark his seizing the throne, David could hardly take them back as his concubines. His treatment of them as widows was probably a kindness in those days. Even today, widows in India are often despised and locked away in widow’s homes. David fled Jerusalem to avoid confronting his son but he failed to consider the plight of these women. In the end his son was killed anyway, and there was a great slaughter of men (18:7, 15).

In fleeing Jerusalem, David also left the people wondering if he was still fit to be their king. The men of the northern tribes called for David’s return, and the men of Judah, many of whom had joined Absalom’s conspiracy, eventually called for his return also. But when he returned the men of his own tribe of Judah and the men of the other ten tribes started bickering, and David did nothing to settle this disputation (19:40-43). So it was that before very long a troublemaker and rebel rose up to exploit this tribal division, and David was faced with another rebellion. Our subheadings are: 'Sheba calls ten tribes to rebel’, ‘Struggles over leadership in David’s army’, ‘Speech and action of a wise woman’, and ‘Senior servants in David’s administration’.

**1. Sheba calls ten tribes to rebel**

A man called Sheba from the tribe of Benjamin decided to blow a trumpet and call the people of Israel to separate from King David and the people of Judah. He is called a worthless person, a troublemaker, a rebel, or literally, ‘a son of Belial’ (20:1). Yet with this ram’s horn and a catchy political phrase, he incited the people of Israel to return to their tents because they had no share in David. That such a person could gain a following shows just how tense the political situation was. It also shows the failure of David and his administration to include people from all the tribes; these people felt excluded from their inheritance in the nation.

It is interesting that when Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, spoke harshly to the people and threatened them, that they took up the same cry as Sheba and the kingdom was divided (1Kings 12:16). This separation led to ongoing civil war, which weakened both the northern and southern kingdoms, and led to them being overrun by enemies. But the initial rebellion led by Sheba was short-lived because the men of Judah remained loyal to David and went to catch and destroy Sheba (20:2).

**2. Struggles over leadership in David’s army**

While the men of Judah were loyal to David, he was having troubles with leadership in his army. David replaced Joab with Amasa when he returned to Jerusalem, a largely political move because Amasa had joined Absalom’s rebellion. Political appointees are seldom the best people for the job, and this was the case with Amasa. When Sheba blew the trumpet by way of rebellion against David, David knew he had to act quickly to put down this rebellion; we note a very different response to the way he responded to Absalom’s rebellion.

David called on his newly appointed general, Amasa, to assemble the men of Judah into an army within three days (20:4). He knew he had to act before Sheba gathered followers and got to a fortified city (20:6). But Amasa failed to get back to David within the three days, so David turned to Abishai, Joab’s older brother, to lead the army in search of Sheba (20:5, 6). Just why Amasa failed we are not told but we can imagine men doubting his loyalty to David, and/or Joab undermining his authority. It is not long before Joab’s name appears in this account, with the army led by Abishai labelled ‘Joab’s men’ (20:7). ‘Joab’s men’ were regular army, and this was joined by a sizable mercenary force of Cherethites and Pelethites led by Benaiah- although he is not mentioned here (cf. 20:23).

Abishai led ‘Joab’s men’ out of Jerusalem in pursuit of Sheba. When they came to a large rock at Gibeon, just a few kilometres northwest of Jerusalem, Amasa suddenly appeared, apparently with some men he had gathered after three days. So here was Amasa, who David first asked to assemble his forces, with Abishai, who David later put in charge, and Joab, who had been demoted by David. Joab did not accept this demotion. Amasa had been handed a poisoned chalice; Joab had previously murdered a rival named Abner (3:27), and had also killed Absalom in cold blood. Clearly, Joab was a man Amasa need to watch carefully.

Joab approached Amasa with smooth words to give the usual greeting kiss. But as he did so his sword or dagger ‘accidently’ fell out of its sheath; he was dressed in full battle armour (29:8,9). Joab’s ‘clumsiness’ was deliberate. He bent over to pick up his dagger so had it in his hand as he took Amasa by the beard to kiss him- a ‘Judas kiss long before Judas! Joab stabbed Amasa in the stomach, killing him on the spot (20:10). Leaving Amasa in the middle of the road wallowing in his own blood, Abishai and Joab left in pursuit of Sheba. Joab had regained his command of the army through treachery and murder.

All the soldiers, but particularly those gathered by Amasa, were obviously shaken by Joab’s treachery. One of Joab’s men stood near Amasa’s bloodied corpse urging them to follow Joab- and no one argued! But they did stop beside Amasa’s corpse as they went by, until Joab’s man dragged the dead body to the side and covered it with a coat (20:11,12).

**3. Speech and action of a wise woman**

Recall if you will the brief but brutal rule of ISIS in the Middle East a few years ago. The Kurds fought bravely against these militant Muslims. One strategy of the Kurds was to enlist women in their army. The Muslim fighters dreaded the idea of being killed by a woman. The military leader and treacherous murderer called Joab was confronted by a woman, a wise woman, when he reached the city to which Sheba had escaped. Joab humbly listened to this woman and accepted her wisdom.

Sheba, the rebel from Benjamin, went all the way north to a place near Dan, gathering supporters as he went; all the Berites anyway (20:14). He took refuge from Joab and his men in a fortified town called Abel of Beth Maachah (20:15). David was afraid this would happen, but Joab was not deterred. He had his men build a siege ramp against the wall of the city so they could climb up and break down the wall.

But a woman, a wise woman from the city called out, asking for Joab, and Joab came forward to listen to her. The woman asked why Joab and his men were disturbing the peace of this city that was renowned as a city of peace, and indeed wisdom. ‘You seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel. Why?’ she asked (20:19). Joab answered her peaceably, explaining that a man from the mountains of Ephraim called Sheba has raised his hand against the king and fled to this city. So this wise woman went to her people, who decapitated Sheba and threw his head over the wall to Joab. Joab was satisfied so blew the trumpet and led his men back to Jerusalem to tell David that the rebellion had been crushed.

It is interesting that this wise woman came forward to stop her city being destroyed; interesting that she is labelled ‘wise’, and interesting that she stepped forward as she did. One man’s head was all it took to save her city. She stands in contrast to David in terms of decisive action that saved the lives of a lot of people. God in his wisdom and love- God is wisdom and love- acted decisively in the cross his Son, Jesus Christ, delivering the world, or all the elect, from sin and death (John 1:29, 1John 2:1).

**4. Senior servants in David’s administration**

The closing verses of this chapter are a record of the names of the people in King David’s administration. We have a similar list at the end of chapter 8 when David returned home victorious over all his enemies because, ‘The Lord preserved David wherever he went’ (8:6,14). Despite the sins of David shortly after that time, and the subsequent rebellion of his son, and now Sheba, his administration remained by and large intact. But there is no reference to David exercising ‘judgment and justice to all his people’ (8:15).

General Joab remains at the top of the list despite David’s effort to replace him. Benaiah, the son of Jehoida, moves up the list and remains as leader of David’s mercenary forces or bodyguard. Jehoshaphat, the son of Ahilud, continues as recorder; kings liked to keep a detailed diary of their exploits.

A new position within David’s administration, and a seemingly important one, was a man in charge of revenue, or, in other translations, forced labour. A man called Adoram or Adoniram took this position. Foreigners taken as prisoner made up the bulk of this labour force, although by Solomon’s time men were conscripted from all Israel (1Kings 5:13).

Sheva or Seraiah continued as scribe, and Zadok and Abiathar continued as priests (20:25). The last man on the list is again a newcomer. Ira the Jairite replaced David’s sons as royal advisor or priest for obvious reasons- his sons were dead! The Lord preserved his kingdom and preserved David as his king, despite David’s sins and subsequent failure to rule wisely and justly. The Lord’s purposes were bigger than any one man, even David. It will be generations before the greater Son of David comes to rule with heavenly wisdom and justice in the heavenly kingdom to which all God’s people belong.

**God and vows** Text: 2Samuel 21

As Christians we must be careful in what we say, particularly when we make promises. The Lord will hold us accountable for every idle or careless word we speak (Mat 12:36). Jesus warns against taking vows or oaths, solemn promises witnessed by God and sometimes associated with the proclaiming of a curse if the person breaks their promise (Mat 5:33-37, James 5:12). Even so, Jesus himself took the high priest seriously when he put Jesus under oath to tell if he was the Son of God (Mat 26:63, 64). The apostle Paul took what seems like a Nazirite vow, resulting in him cutting off his hair at Cenchrea (Acts 18:18). Maybe the vow was associated with prayer for safety; the point is that Paul was keeping his vow. Are you keeping your vows?

Most of us take a vow some time in our life. The most common vow we take is associated with marriage, so-called wedding vows. The husband and the wife solemnly promise to be faithful to each other ‘till death do us part’. They do not announce a curse upon themselves if they break this vow, but we do see a curse come upon those breaking their vow anyway even if it is not seen as a divine curse. It is tragic, yet instructive, to see the richest men in our land being divorced. Such men probably thought money could solve all their problems but not their marriage so it appears, and certainly their riches will not solve their broken relationship with almighty God. Becoming a member of the church does involve a vow; we simply ask you to profess saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But office-bearers like ministers, elders and deacons are required to sign what we call a ‘Formula of Subscription’. They solemnly swear belief in the Bible, and to uphold the doctrines set out in the Westminster Confession of Faith, our subordinate standard. Among other promises made in this ‘Formula’ they promise ‘to submit to the decisions of my brothers in the various courts of this church’.

Here in chapter 21 of 2Samuel we come to the closing four chapters of this book of the Bible, chapters often referred to as an epilogue. David survived a rebellion led by his son, Absalom, and another led by Sheba from the tribe of Benjamin. What we find in these closing chapters is not necessarily chronological, although chapter 23 records the ‘last words of David’. But when Shimei called David a bloodthirsty man because of ‘all the blood of the house of Saul’ (16:8), he may have had in mind David’s giving of seven sons of Saul for execution by the Gibeonites, as recorded here in this chapter. Chapter 21 refers to a famine in Israel that went on for three years, a natural disaster that led David to pray, asking the Lord, ‘Why?’ Famines were often caused by a drought; remember the seven year drought and subsequent famine in Egypt. David did not know about climate change so did not run to the scientists and the politicians demanding something be done about stopping climate change! David was the government anyway! What David did was run to God because, ‘God’s in charge of the weather’ as the children’s chorus says. David also knew that under the terms of the covenant the Lord made with his people, drought could be a curse from God for disobedience to his covenant commands (Deut 28:23, 24) - one of which is ‘do not bear false witness to your neighbour’.

**1. Broken vow to the Gibeonites**

After three years of famine, David went to the Lord asking, ‘Why?’ and the Lord answered him (21:1). The Lord had not forgotten the vow that Joshua and the rulers of Israel had made with the people of Gibeon, even if David and especially Saul had. These Amorites or Canaanites had tricked Joshua into thinking they were from a faraway place when in fact, their town of Gibeon was close by (Josh 9:14-16). King Saul had broken this vow or treaty made by Joshua and the current drought was God’s curse or punishment upon the nation for this sin. There is no previous mention of Saul killing the Gibeonites but their town was near to Saul’s home town of Gibeah. Maybe the descendants of the Gibeonites has upset Saul in some way or maybe he just wanted their property. So, ruthless and violent man that he was, Saul set about exterminating the Gibeonites. The reason given as, ‘In his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah’, sounds more like an excuse than the truth; Saul’s zeal for David and Judah was to get rid of them also (21:2). Both Saul and David should have been aware of what is written in the book of Joshua. Ignorance of what is written in the Bible is no excuse for breaking the commands of almighty God!

After asking the Lord about the drought/famine crippling the country and being told by the Lord it was because Saul had killed the Gibeonites in breach of the treaty signed by Joshua, David called the Gibeonites to come and speak with him (21:2). He didn’t ask the Lord how to make atonement for King Saul’s sin but asked the Gibeonites, ‘What shall I do for you?’ (21:3). The current drought/famine was God’s curse upon the nation for this sin of their king. To remove God’s curse and restore the blessing of these people upon ‘the inheritance of the Lord’, atonement had to be made, but what would this atonement be? David asked the Gibeonites to choose. Maybe these people had been praying for God to avenge them of this broken vow for a long time.

Many of their number had been killed by the bloodthirsty Saul in breach of the vow or treaty made. Nothing would bring these people back, and no amount of money could atone for their death. The Gibeonites were not interested in monetary compensation (21:4). In atoning for sin, retribution may be demanded, depending on the nature of the sin. Saul’s sin was more than theft of property or goods; it was unlawful killing. But the Gibeonites did not want David to ‘kill any man in Israel for us’ (21:4). If David was thinking in such terms, he would have been relieved by what he heard.

David repeated his question saying, ‘Whatever you say, I will do for you’ (21:4). The Gibeonites then told David what they wanted, what they thought was appropriate atonement. ‘Let seven men of his [Saul’s] descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul’ (21:6). David had asked what they wanted so he had to accept their demand. Saul would have killed many more than seven Gibeonites, but seven was the number of completeness, and satisfaction for them. To be hanged was a curse in itself within Israel (Deut 21:23), where executions were by stoning. For this to be done in the city of Saul made the atonement a public witness to the community. The law in Israel prevented children being put to death for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16), but the Gibeonites were not Israelites. Even so, the men David gives them may have been complicit in Saul’s killing of the Gibeonites.

David would have been relieved that they required only seven from Saul’s family be put to death, and also relieved that he was allowed to choose these seven. David himself was bound by an oath he made to Jonathan (1Sam 20:14-17). Remembering this oath, he had previously asked if there was any left in Jonathan’s house and was told about a cripple called Mephibosheth (21:7). David kept his covenant promise to Jonathan back then, and again here as he looks for men to atone Saul’s failure to keep the oath given to the Gibeonites. David took two sons of Rizpah, a wife or concubine of Saul, one of whom happened to be called Mephibosheth also (21:8). He took another five men from Saul’s house, this time grandsons through Saul’s daughter Merab; it was Merab not Michal who was married to Adriel, the son of Barzillai the Meholathite- a different Barzillai to the rich man from Gilead (1Sam 18:19, 2Sam 19:31). David delivered these seven descendants of Saul to the Gibeonites as agreed, and they ‘hanged them on the hill before the Lord’ (21:9). ‘The execution of the seven atoned for Saul’s sin and propitiated divine wrath’.

The reference to the time or season of these public executions is interesting; it was the beginning of the barley harvest, meaning it was April. If there was any harvest that year it must have been meagre because there was a famine at the time. With atonement being made, the Lord could have brought about a good harvest; although the reference to ‘late rains’ in verse 10, and to God heeding the prayer for the land in verse 14, indicate that the drought was not yet broken.

**2. Bones buried with honour**

A famine caused David to ask the Lord, ‘Why?’ He was told by the Lord, and he acted to make atonement for Saul’s breaking of the covenant made with the Gibeonites, a human covenant. Remember that the Lord also holds us accountable to the covenant he has made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ. Breaking of this divine- human covenant is also called sin and must be atoned for. The Lord Jesus Christ made such atonement for us in the blood-sacrifice of the cross.

Rizpah watched her sons get hanged but could not leave them exposed to attack from birds or beasts. In India we saw what is called the ‘tower of silence’ where a religious community once exposed the bodies of their dead. Another religious community threw their dead bodies into the river where birds, beasts, and even fish attacked them. Rizpah threw sackcloth on a rock and kept watch over the bodies of her sons day and night as they hung before the Lord in Gibeah (21:10). She did this until the late rains poured down from heaven.

The rains signalled the Lord’s lifting of his curse from the land. Yet there was something else that David needed to do. The conduct of Rizpah, the mother of Armoni and Mephibosheth, touched David such that he acted to honour Saul and Jonathan by bringing their bones home for an honourable burial. The bodies of Saul and Jonathan were hung on a wall at Beth Shan by the Philistines and taken down at night by the men of Jabesh Gilead. David was moved to bring their bones home (21:12-14). He had them buried in their father’s tomb, along with the bones of these recently hanged men from the house of Saul. ‘And after that God heeded the prayer for the land’ (21:14).

Is God heeding your prayers? If not, is there anything you need to confess or to set right in your life? If we are able to right wrongs of the past in our life, or the life of our family, then let us do so now and see the Lord bless us and our family.

**3. Brother and relatives of Goliath**

This chapter ends with a brief record of David’s ongoing encounters with the Philistines. David became famous after he killed the Philistine giant called Goliath; he was only a boy at the time, a boy who trusted in the God of Israel. He went on to become a great warrior, a warrior king. But he did not always fight alone, and as he got older he relied more and more on younger men. This passage tells us about some loyal and brave men who helped David, especially in battles with Philistine giants, or ‘Rapha’ in Hebrew. Sometimes called Anakites, these giants were enlisted by the Philistines, and were formidable foes on the battlefield.

Probably because of advancing age, David felt faint on the battlefield as he fought with a giant called Ishbi-Benob (21:16). This giant had a bronze spear half the weight of the Goliath David killed as a boy (21:16, 1Sam 17:7). Thankfully Abishai, the brother of Joab, came to David’s aid and killed this Philistine. The men later told David to stay at home in future because they wanted to keep him alive as ‘the lamp of Israel’ (21:17). David would die eventually but his importance as the lamp of Israel would one day be fulfilled in his descendant who is the light of Israel, and the whole world (John 8:12).

In another battle with the Philistines another giant was killed (21:18). In a third battle, Elhanan from Bethlehem killed Goliath the Gittite (21:19). This is not the Goliath killed by David but his brother, as indicated in the text of our NKJV Bible on the basis of 1Chronicles 20:5. In a fourth battle recorded in this chapter, a giant with an extra digit on each hand and foot was encountered down in Gath. He came out defying the armies of Israel and David’s nephew came forward to kill this fourth and final giant enlisted in the Philistine army. Like the original Goliath killed by David, all these Goliaths were killed by warriors taught by David and loyal to him.

While this chapter ends with this listing of warriors who killed Philistine giants, let us not forget the important lesson learned by David from a crisis in the country, namely the importance of oaths or vows made with other people, and above all with the Lord himself. Be careful and prayerful in making a vow, and when you do be careful and prayerful to keep it.

**David knew danger and divine deliverance**  Text: 2Samuel 22:1-20

David began life as a shepherd, fighting off lions and bears that threatened the sheep. One day he saw a Philistine giant threatening the army of Israel so, in the Lord’s strength, he fought and killed Goliath. David joined Saul’s army and fought many battles against the Philistines. But Saul got jealous and tried to kill David. He spent years on the run from Saul. Maybe the closest he came to being captured and killed by Saul was when he was surrounded at a mountain in Maon. When a messenger came telling Saul the Philistines were attacking, David saw his escape as an answer to prayer (1Sam 23:27). After Saul’s death, David became king. One day David committed adultery and murder. Not long after this his son conspired against him, but the Lord delivered David yet again.

The title of the ‘song’ or poem recorded in this chapter is not specific as to which ‘deliverance’ David is talking about, but it does tell us that David wrote this song when ‘the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul’. Occurring here at the end of the two books of Samuel points to a wide reference to the life of David. David trusted in the Lord from a young age, and was still trusting in the Lord when he died. He experienced all the difficulties that we face in life, and he sinned just as we have, and still do, but as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death that is this sinful world, he feared no evil because he knew the Lord was with him. He walked with the Lord, praying and praising God all the days of his life.

It is interesting that the Books of Samuel begin with the prayer of Hannah, in which she calls God a ‘rock’ who brings down the mighty, judging and destroying all his enemies, just as David does in this song. In fact, she concludes with the assurance that the Lord will give strength to his king, to David as it turns out, or is it the Lord Jesus himself? (1Sam 2:10)

This song is quite long; indeed Psalm 18 is the third longest psalm in the Psalter. We should read it right through, but to study it more closely we will look at verses 1-20 today. Our subheadings are, ‘Praise the Lord, my rock’, ‘Prayer answered with shaking of the earth’ and, ‘Plucked from danger’.

**1. Praise the Lord my rock**

David’s experiences in life led to the list of metaphors he uses for God’s protection and deliverance from his enemies (22:2-4: the first line of Psalm 18 is not included here in this chapter). David was a military man or warrior who spent much of his life fighting in what was in those days hand to hand combat with spears, swords and shields. Cities had walls and were often on tops of hills- Jerusalem was a fortress city. Besides, when on the run from Saul, David lived in caves and strongholds in desert regions of Palestine.

David pictured the Lord as his rock, his fortress, his shield, his stronghold, and place of refuge (22:2, 3). Rocks provide protection from most attacks, even from shells and mortars that are used today. The individual or army that occupied the hill and built a fortress there was difficult to drive out. David saw the Lord as his fortress and stronghold. He found strength in the Lord to stand against his enemies. He attributed his victory over Goliath to the Lord, as well as his victories or escapes from Saul (1Sam 23:28).

The shield provides protection during hand-to-hand combat; again David saw the Lord as protecting him. Paul refers to the shield of faith, faith being a gift from God. If you have faith in the Lord, are exercising this faith by holding up the shield of faith to quench the fiery darts of the evil one? (Eph 6:16). Or is your shield under your bed while you stagger from one attack after another? The Lord had protected David from his enemies on many occasions because of his ‘shield of faith’, and in this song he thanks God for this protection and deliverance.

Do you see the Lord as a place of refuge, a place where you can go when attacked by enemies? If you belong to the Lord, Satan has you in his sights. He is trying to bring you into temptation or into fear of the world. Many fellow believers are being persecuted for their faith today, and are praying to the Lord to keep them safe. The apostle Paul knew about persecution and also about temptation. He uses military metaphors when urging us to stand against the schemes of the devil in Ephesians 6: ‘The shield of faith’ and ‘sword of the Spirit’ given to us by the Lord. He, like David, went to the Lord in prayer when in physical or spiritual danger. Are you in the habit of coming ‘boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Heb 4:16)?

This is a song of praise to the Lord for his grace and power in delivering us from our enemies. David had many enemies, not because he went around upsetting people but because he was a man who feared the Lord. If you are living a godly life, and faithfully sharing the gospel, you will make enemies because people do not like being told they are sinners. Usually such people pack their bags and leave the church, but some stay to make trouble and others, by the grace of God, are brought to repentance and salvation. Our relationship with the Lord is built upon confession of sin, forgiveness, and ongoing trust in the Lord. David loved the Lord and trusted in the Lord; ‘My deliverer …in whom I will trust’ (22:2, 3).

David knew danger, but he also knew deliverance. He cried out to the Lord when he was in danger, and he remembered to thank and praise the Lord when he was delivered (22:4). The Lord is great and gracious but he is also a jealous God. So do not forget to give thanks to the Lord when he answers your prayer. Do not be like the nine lepers healed by Jesus, who went off without giving him thanks (Luke 17:17). Your going off to other places when fellow believers are gathered to praise and thank the Lord does not go unnoticed by the others, or by the Lord himself!

**2. Prayer answered with shaking of the earth**

Do you trust the Lord like David? Do you believe God is able to deliver you from all your enemies, all your troubles, and all your fears? Or do you get worried and fearful when threatened by powerful people, or the powers of this world? David speaks of fear in the face of ungodliness, and of death, but in his distress he called upon the Lord (22:7). We live in the presence of terrible ungodliness as the list LGBTQ gets longer and longer. Many are distressed about climate change, and some are distressed about war, which continues to be a reality long after the time of David! What about you? Are you distressed by these things? Then listen to David when he says, ‘In my distress I called upon the Lord’ (22:7).

It is natural for us to fear things greater or more powerful than we are, but no one and no thing is more powerful than God, who created all that exists in heaven and on earth. So call to God, ‘our Father in heaven’, as David did, when something causes you to fear. He called upon the Lord with confidence that the Lord would hear. David was not a doubter; he prayed in faith to the all-powerful and all-loving God, the God who does not slumber or sleep.

David’s prayer was answered without delay: ‘Then the earth shook and trembled’ (22:8). David witnessed the Lord coming down to deliver him and scatter his enemies. How dare anyone touch the Lord’s anointed, the apple of his eye! We are not told of the Lord shaking the earth when David prayed, but he certainly did when the greater Son of David cried out from the cross; the earth quaked, rocks split in two, and there was darkness over the land (Mat 27:51). David had no doubts about the power of God to save him from his enemies because God has power to shake the earth itself (Heb 12:25f).

David would have been aware of Samuel calling upon the Lord to send thunder and rain (1Sam 12:17), but what he describes here in verses 8-16 is probably a picture of Moses crossing the Red Sea, and going up Mt Sinai. The Lord was angry with Pharaoh and drowned him and his army in the sea, which He had divided to save Moses and his people. David writes of the channels of the sea being seen and the foundations of the world being uncovered (22:16). When the Lord gets angry it is as if he blasts out from his nostrils a powerful wind, along with fire, lightning, and thunder.

Mt Sinai shook when the Lord came down to meet with Moses. Earthquakes are terribly frightening and dangerous. Man with all his power and technology still cannot stop them. Nor can he stop volcanoes, which are similarly powerful and dangerous. The people stood in fear of the Lord when they saw lightning and thunder, and smoke and fire on Mt Sinai. David understood, as those people did, that all this was a demonstration of the power of God as he came down in power to shake the earth, and speak through thunder and lightning (22:14). We still see earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and terrible storms, but do we see the hand of the Lord in such events? We hear about ‘extreme weather events’ and, ‘more extreme weather events’, but who is listening to the voice of God?

‘He rode upon a cherub and flew’ (22:11). This is a strange image to us- but see Ezekiel 1:4f. Cherubs are attendants or protectors of the divine. They are pictured as carrying the throne of the Almighty. ‘Dark clouds’ are associated with God protecting and guiding his people in the Exodus and through the desert, a cloud by day and fire by night (22:12,13). The picture is of the Lord coming down from heaven to save and to judge. God came down in the Lord Jesus Christ to save, and to judge. Now is the day of salvation; full and final judgment will come when Jesus comes again on the clouds of heaven!

As David reflected on these natural events, he was reminded of just how awesome is the power of God. He knew God could shake the earth, and divide the sea; David was never so bold as to think he as a man could stop the sea level rising! Do not forget however, that Jesus spoke and stopped the waves. When God heard his cry for help, David had no doubt that he was in the most powerful hands in all the world. He knew the Lord could move heaven and earth to save him from his enemies. ‘Underlying these poetic words is the understanding that the Almighty will turn the universe inside out, if necessary, to deliver His servant’. Do you believe God loves you so much that he will turn the universe inside out to save you? He has done this of course, in sending his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross and save you from sin and death.

**3. Plucked from danger**

What a difference aircraft have made to war these days. Underground bunkers become more important than rocks and fortresses. Moreover, helicopters are now a vital part of rescues, especially in floods or at sea. David did not see such rescues, but he did know that the Lord reached down and wonderfully saved him from his enemies (22:17). The way the Lord rescued him was as if he plucked him up and transported him to a safe place. The Lord ‘brought him out into a broad place’, a place of freedom from his enemies (22:18). The Lord could shake the earth, or divide the sea to deliver his chosen ones, and he could, in an equally awesome and amazing way, simply reach down to pluck up an individual in whom he delighted.

When Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan, as voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased’. Jesus is God’s Son whom he sent from heaven to rescue persons in whom he delights. In Jesus Christ we are lifted up to sit with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:5). They say the Jordan is not a river you want to swim in these days. One summer in India was so hot I took a dip in the Ganges. I came out with a layer of mud (sewage) over me that took a long time to remove.

God sent Jesus to cleanse us of sin, to give us true life or life in abundance. Jesus said he came to set us free, to set us on the path of life. Do not be like the Jews who blindly and proudly said to Jesus, ‘We are not in bondage’, we are already free (John 8:33). This is like a drowning man saying to his rescuer lowered down from the chopper to save him, ‘I am fine; leave me alone’. Blindness to sin is the most serious and widespread malady of the human race. Yet the cure is close at hand. God is holding out the cure in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Just and merciful in salvation** Text: 2Samuel 22:21-31

In the history of Israel, Moses and David stand out as faithful servants of the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, and David was a man after God’s own heart. Both pointed to Christ, what theologians call ‘types’ of Christ. David was the Lord’s anointed, the king of Israel. One of David’s descendants would sit on the throne until the coming of the Anointed One, the Son of God sent down from heaven. Being a ‘type’ of Christ did not mean David was sinless; he was only human. David committed adultery and murder; he was also guilty of the sin of pride which made the Lord angry (2Sam 24:10). Let no one discount the seriousness of such sin. David knew that the Lord’s ‘eyes are on the haughty, that you may bring them down’ (22:28). Peter, quoting Proverbs, reminds us that, ‘God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble’ (1Peter 5:5).

David wrote this song, according to its title, when ‘the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul’. We have looked at the first twenty verses in which David describes, in military metaphors, how the Lord was his place of refuge when enemies were after him. He describes the Lord as his rock, his fortress, and his shield. As David prayed, he remembered God delivering his people through Moses. The Lord had delivered David, plucking him out of a flood of enemies. The Lord had brought him to a safe place because he delighted in him (22:17, 20).

Here in the second part of his song, which is also found in Psalm 18, David continues to reflect on his covenant relationship with the Lord, a covenant of love, but also of justice. David trusted in the Lord, but this did not mean his life would be free of trouble. Indeed, shortly after he was anointed by Samuel he had to flee for his life from the jealous King Saul. After some years on the run he was made king in Hebron and then in Jerusalem. God was with David and gave him victory over all his enemies, the enemies of Israel. But as we know, David sinned and then tried to cover it up. He confessed and the Lord forgave him, even though his sin brought trouble into his family and into the kingdom.

The Lord made a covenant with David when he became king, and related to him under the terms of this covenant. David does not refer directly to this covenant here in this song, apart from using the covenant name of God, ‘Yahweh’ or Lord’, but we will keep this covenant in mind, especially when we hear David speaking prophetically of this coming anointed one, even as he himself lives and reigns as ‘type’ of Christ. Our first subheading, for verses 21-25 is, ‘Goodness of God’, our second for verses 26-28 , ‘Grace of God’, our third, ‘God my light and my strength’

**1. Goodness of God**

Reflecting on God’s goodness in delivering him because he delighted in him (22:20), David speaks of the Lord rewarding him according to his ‘righteousness’ and ‘clean hands’ (22:21). He goes on to speak of being blameless before the Lord (22:24). How could David make such a claim after committing the sins that he did? Do we accuse him of hypocrisy? No. We need to go back and understand where David is coming from. We go back to Abraham with whom God made a covenant after choosing him and delivering him into the Promised Land. The Lord said to Abraham, ‘I am Almighty God; walk before me be blameless’ (Gen 17:1). Abraham was not sinless but ‘he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him as righteousness’ (Gen 15:6).

In speaking of ‘my righteousness’ David is not claiming to be without sin, something only his descendant, Jesus Christ, could claim; there is an element of prophecy in these verses. David was looking at the covenant the Lord had made with Moses, and later with himself. He was looking at the commands or demands of that covenant. Yes, he broke the commands, but he repented and the Lord forgave him under the terms of the covenant. ‘If David was a great sinner, he was also a great repenter’. He knew that the Lord forgave his sin, removing it from him as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). Having been forgiven, David remained in the covenant; he was not cast out with the wicked, with those who are the enemies of God. David had not joined with the wicked, nor walked in the counsel of the ungodly, or sat in the seat of sinners (Ps 1). The righteous and the blameless were seen in contrast to the wicked; they were in the covenant, looking to the Lord and actively depending on the Lord each day and in every aspect of life. The Lord showed delight in David when he brought him back to Jerusalem after he fled from Absalom (15:25, 26). ‘David could stand in a *position* of righteousness even as he strove, by the power of God’s Spirit, to *live* in righteousness’.

David was a man who examined his life and his heart, as seen in the Psalm 17 and Psalm 139:23, 24. He confessed his sin, knowing that his covenant God forgives sin. David was not the only man who claimed to be blameless, as in a man of honesty and integrity. We have already mentioned Abraham and Moses (Numb 12:3), and Job is called ‘blameless and upright’ (Job 1:1). When the rich young ruler came to Jesus seeking eternal life, Jesus directed him to the commandments, and he claimed to have kept these (Luke 18:20). We know that he went away sad, but the point is, the commandments cannot be ignored. Note that Jesus also taught this man that only God is good.

**2. Grace of God**

The Lord is first and foremost the God of truth and justice. We focus on his grace, as David did, but grace is necessary to fulfil justice for sinners like David and you! In his justice God condemns sinners; we have no hope of salvation, or of being justified, without grace. Just as David saw the Lord dealing with him according to his righteousness and clean hands, so he saw the Lord dealing with the merciful or faithful according to their faithfulness (22:26). It is the same with the blameless and with the pure; the just God will repay them according to their deeds. And it is the same with devious or crooked individuals; they will reap the rewards of their actions.

It is amazing, or we might say concerning, how the Lord brings people down in the same way they try to bring others down; remember Haman in the Book of Esther. David says of the Lord, ‘With the devious/crooked you show yourself shrewd’ (22:27). When David himself got onto the crooked path, lusting after Bathsheba and committing adultery, and then tried to cover up his sin by committing another sin, God was not fooled. God was shrewd or astute in pursuing David until he repented. ‘God will not be mocked; for whatever a man sows that he will reap’ (Gal 6:7). Eli was told by a man of God that the Lord honours those who honour him, while ‘those who despise me will be lightly esteemed’ (1Sam 2:30).

From Genesis to Revelation the Lord is seen as saving the poor and humble while bringing down the haughty or proud (1Sam 2:8, Ps 101:5, Prov 3:34, 6:17, James 4:6, 1Peter 5:6). The song of Hannah at the beginning of the Book of Samuel, like this song of David at the end, declares God’s concern for the poor and the afflicted, and his power to lift them up (22:28, 1Sam 2:8). In broad terms we could say that ‘the theology of the books of Samuel is summarised in the songs of Hannah and David that begin and end it’.

In the Beatitudes Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ and ‘blessed are meek’. He also declared a blessing upon the merciful and upon the pure in heart, which is what David declares here in this song: ‘With the pure you show yourself pure’ (22:27, Mat 5:7). Jesus had a blessing for the humble but not for the proud, which is what David says here in verse 28: ‘You [God] save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them down’.

Most people understand and support justice, except when it comes to themselves. Few admit to being proud because they compare themselves to other people. But when we stand before Jesus our pride is revealed; it keeps us from coming under the shelter of his wings, as Jesus said. Humility is essential to salvation; ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up’ (James 4:10). No one else can save you, and the Lord will not save you while you remain proud and haughty before him and before men.

**3. God my light and my strength**

David stops looking at his own righteousness to look at the grace of the Lord. It was only in God’s strength that he had victory in any battle. It was only by God’s protection that he escaped Saul and other enemies. The Lord was his shield, as well as his strength when it came to bending a bow of bronze, and running against a troop or leaping over a wall (22:30,31, 35). What a vivid description of war, as it was in David’s day. Remember Jonathan climbing the rock face to attack the Philistine outpost (1Sam 14:4). David might have recalled the night he captured Saul’s spear and water bottle (1Sam 26:7); did the Lord guide him by some unseen light. Darkness often has a spiritual meaning, but it is also an important tactic in warfare, still today.

In looking to the Lord, David comes up with many ‘For you’ references to God, many attributes of the Lord. We have already seen that God saves the humble, lights his lamp, and helps him run and jump. ‘David as the lamp of Israel (21:17) merely reflects the blinding light of the glory of God, who is the lamp of David himself’ (22:29). In the second of the seven ‘I am’ declarations in the gospel of John, Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world: ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’ (John 8:12). David knew what Jesus was talking about even a thousand years before Jesus spoke these words. Do you know and understand what Jesus is talking about? And what about David reflecting the light of the Lord in his life? Are you reflecting Jesus to those around you?

In verse 30 David says that God’s way is perfect; Jesus reminds us that God is perfect at the end of his sermon on the mount (Mat 5:48). God is omniscient and omnipotent. David consulted the Lord before going into battle because God knows everything. Remember Saul’s dilemma when God would not answer his prayer. When the Lord tells us to do something we know we will succeed, so do not doubt God’s loving purpose for your life, or his power to fulfil his purposes in you. When the Lord speaks, he, in effect, acts.

**The Rock of my salvation** Text 2Samuel 22:31-51

Despite being greatly outnumbered in the battle of Agincourt in 1415, King Henry V of England defeated the French. It is on record that he and his men prayed before going to battle, and that he ordered the singing of Psalm 115 when they won. He and his entire army sang, ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory’. They sang what may well be a psalm of David; certainly, the words of this song recorded in 2Samuel 22, and in Psalm 18, are the words of King David giving all praise and glory to the Lord for deliverance from King Saul, and victory over all his enemies.

‘The Lord lives, blessed be my Rock!’ are words that we still sing today because of the victory we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, the cross of Christ and his resurrection was victory over Satan, the ruler of this world since man’s fall in the Garden of Eden. We pray as Jesus taught us, ‘Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, amen’.

**1. God gives strength**

‘An offering of praise to the person of the Lord’ is one man’s summary of verses 32-37 of 2Samuel 22. There is no other God except the Lord, the God of Israel (22:32). The Gentiles came to battle with their idols, but they might as well have gone home if the Lord had spoken to David. When David prayed and the Lord told him to fight the Philistines, they were as good as dead. As he gathered up the idols they had left behind David said, ‘The Lord has broken through my enemies before me’ (2Sam 5:18-21).

God’s ways are perfect, and his word is perfect or proven; it is truth distilled and without impurity (22:31). David speaks of God’s word as being more precious and desirable than gold (Ps 19:10). Any other book has to be read with discernment; in fact, we test whatever we read against the word of God, because God’s word is true, and it is unchanging. Those who begin to question what is written in the word of God soon come to grief- they find themselves falling off the rock of their salvation. For centuries men have been studying the Bible in the hope of finding some error, but they have all failed.

Again David calls the Lord his rock; he began this song singing, ‘The Lord is my rock’ and he ends with, ‘The Lord lives, blessed be my Rock!’ (22:2, 47). Do you think of the Lord as your rock? Many people have no rock to stand on; this is obvious as you see them floundering about in life looking for some foundation, some meaning in life or some rock to stand on. Jesus saw such people as harassed and helpless (Mat 9:36). Many ‘go with the flow’, not knowing where they may end up; they always end up dissatisfied, if not disillusioned with life altogether. May we all know the Lord as our rock, the rock of our salvation?

David describes the blessings that flow from having God the Lord as his rock. He acknowledges the gifts of God’s grace, namely strength and power, strength in his feet, feet like a deer, and in his arms to bend a bow of bronze (22:33-35). Deer run fast but are sure footed, while to bend a bronze bow takes unusual strength. When it comes to singing this song, as found in Psalm 18, I find it difficult to sing the line which says, ‘In skills of war he trains my hand’. Yet our fathers fought in a war and gave thanks to God for giving them the skills and the strength to fight. As believers we are in a spiritual war of course, and we need to take up the spiritual weapons the Lord gives and fight in his strength, the weapon of prayer being paramount.

Speaking directly to the Lord in verses 36 and 37, David says that it was the Lord who gave him, ‘the shield of Your salvation’ and kept his feet from slipping; Psalm 18 has an extra line about the Lord holding him up by his right hand. These two verses point to David as king, ruling with wisdom from above. Having God’s shield guarantees David victory. The warrior God was a wise and gentle God, exacting justice. The warrior king must be wise and gentle also as he leads the people of God. ‘While it was the gentleness of God exercised that allowed David success, it was the gentleness God taught him that was his true greatness’ (Kidner).

**2.God gives victory**  
David continues speaking to the Lord in verses 38-46, saying, ‘I have pursued and destroyed my enemies’, and giving all glory to God (22:38, 40). It is difficult for us to sing words like, ‘You have armed me with strength for the battle’ and, ‘I beat them as fine as dust’, but we dare not brush aside these words of Scripture as having no relevance for us today; we have just said how valuable the word of God is for us still today. Maybe we are to think of our enemy Satan, although even then it is Jesus who has overcome Satan in the cross and resurrection (1Cor 15:57).

David has just made it clear that God gave him strength (22:33) so this description of a battle must be seen in this light. David describes how he overran and destroyed the enemy, with another acknowledgment that God armed him with strength, and made his enemies fear and fall under his feet (22:38-40). ‘David virtually exhausts the lexicon of Hebrew verbs that have to do with annihilation!’ In holy war, surrender did not necessarily mean escaping death. Standing on the neck of one’s enemy was a mark of victory in those days (22:41, Ps 110:1).

The enemy looked to their gods for help against the onslaught of David, but they were powerless to save. They even looked to the Lord, but he did not answer them (22:42). Some people put images on their shelf like the Hindus and, like the Hindu, pray to a god they do not know. It will be interesting, tragically interesting, to hear many crying out to Jesus when he comes to judge the world, but he will not hear. Many will cry, ‘Lord, Lord’ but he will say, ‘I never knew you’ (Mat 7:21-23). The Lord does not hear the cry of sinners unless and until they repent of their sin. The Lord cannot be manipulated like other gods, and he is not a good luck charm to be worn around the neck or painted on a house. That said, the Lord will hear Gentiles who, hearing the word of the God, repent and turn to him in faith: ‘I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the Gentiles’ (22:50).

David went on to subdue his enemies on every side; their gods were shown to be impotent before the God of Israel. David expanded the borders of Israel from river to river, from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, and brought peace to the land (8:15, Gen 15:18). Even so, to say, ‘You made me the head of the nations’ and, ‘Foreigners submit to me’ seems to be more than a reference to David. These words are prophetic; they refer to the ‘greater Son of David’ and to the reign of Messiah. ‘David’s empire was only a picture of the kingdom of God that will one day be governed by David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus’. It will be consummated when he comes again in power and glory on the clouds of heaven.

The picture of David holding out from Saul in caves and strongholds, and later of his enemies fallen under his feet, can be linked to passages in the NT. Paul writes that Jesus must reign till he has put all his enemies under his feet (1Cor 15:25), quoting from Psalm 8:6, a psalm of David. In Philippians 2:10 Paul again writes of the enemies of God bowing the knee before King Jesus, and then in Revelation 6:15 we have the picture of the rich, the famous, and all who reject Jesus, hiding themselves in caves and in the rocks from the Lamb of God in his wrath.

It is true that Jesus from the cross cried out, ‘Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do’, but the day of mercy and forgiveness will come to an end when Jesus returns in judgment. What we read here in this song of David seems to contradict the gospel but let us remember the whole gospel which includes divine justice and judgment upon the enemies of God.

**3. Give thanks among the Gentiles**  
This psalm ends, like many others, on a note of praise and worship. Worship means giving glory to God, and this is what David does, even in the midst of the Gentiles. He declares, ‘The Lord lives!’ and, ‘Blessed be my Rock!’ (22:47). Seeing God as a rock, as his rock of salvation, is the underlying theme of this song of praise written by David when the Lord delivered him from Saul and all his enemies (22:1). A rock gives protection from the arrows of the enemy. A rock gives a place to stand when flood waters rise and threaten to drown us.

Not long before I became minister of this church I attended a mission conference at a place called Weston-Super-Mare in southwest England. On the weekend we visited Bath. On the way to Bath we drove past a huge rock where it is thought Augustus Toplady sheltered from a storm. After sheltering from a storm in a cleft in this rock, Toplady wrote the famous hymn, ‘Rock of Ages’. This experience became a metaphor for his finding shelter in the Lord Jesus Christ from the difficulties and afflictions that a Christian encounters in this world.

David gives thanks and praise to God for all his victories, and calls upon the people to join him in praise and worship (22:50). The word translated ‘give thanks’ means to confess or acknowledge publicly (Rom 15:9). We do not gather in secret to worship the Lord but gather for public worship each Lord’s Day. Persecuted Christians may find this difficult, but we are not persecuted so why do Christians not gather for public worship each week? See how the Lord brings people into his house from time to time!

The battle is the Lord’s, and in His name, David proclaims victory. God avenged David; David refused to take personal revenge against Saul or anyone else. Similarly, David refused to take personal glory. All glory and praise went to the Lord. David was a king like no other, a man after God’s own heart, and a ‘type’ of Christ, the King even greater than David because he lives and reigns forever, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

David’s reference to giving thanks to the Lord among the Gentiles is taken by the apostle Paul as prophetic of Jesus and the gospel being proclaimed among the Gentiles, and the Gentiles bringing glory to God for his mercy (18:49, Rom 15:9). Paul preached to Gentiles as well as Jews. He proclaimed the kingdom of God as comprising both Jew and Gentile together as one, praising and magnifying the name of Jesus.

Words referring to Messiah, to Jesus Christ our Lord, continue in the closing verse or doxology of this song. David was the anointed king of Israel but was not the Messiah: Messiah means ‘anointed one’. God delivers his king and shows mercy to his anointed (22:51), to David in the first instance, but then we read, ‘and to his descendants forevermore’. David did not live forever. Who of his descendants is referred to as ‘God’s anointed’? The voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be, ‘My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’ (Mark 1:11), gives us a clue, and more than a clue. Our Lord Jesus Christ was, ‘Born of the seed of David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead’ (Rom 1:3,4).

**David’s last words and more mighty men** Text: 2Samuel 23

‘The sweet psalmist of Israel’ is a title David claims as he writes this short poem, which the text tells us are ‘the last words of David’ (23:1). They are not his dying words, but like anyone’s last words they are reflective and solemn. In addition to describing himself as the ‘sweet psalmist of Israel’, the man whose name is on seventy-three of the one hundred and fifty psalms in the Psalter describes himself as ‘a man raised up on high’ or better, ‘the man exalted by the Most High’ (23:1 NIV). In a parallel line he is, ‘the anointed of the God of Jacob’.

David was indeed, the anointed of God and the greatest king of Israel, but he gave all praise and glory to God for all that he accomplished in life. We may not be kings or rulers, but let us give thanks to God for whatever we have achieved in life. As believers, our lives are in his hands. You may have medals from your school or sports club, but even as young people let us be giving thanks and praise to the Lord. You may not be able to say with David that, ‘He trains my hands for war’ (Ps 144:1), but the Lord does give you the ability, as well as the health and strength to achieve things on the sports field, in the school, in the workplace and even in church and family. If your ‘medal’ is a ‘Best Dad ever’ or ‘Best friend ever’ mug, you are a blessed person!

Following David’s ‘last words’ poem, this chapter returns to listing and describing David’s mighty men. This listing began at the end of chapter 21 with four men, including Abisahi, who bravely killed Philistine giants (21:17).

**1. David’s last words**

David was king of Israel but was also a prophet who spoke words given him by God (cf. Acts 2:30). In this poem he begins with the ‘formula’ of a prophecy in saying, ‘Thus says’ or ‘The oracle of’, although it is not, ‘Thus says the Lord’. But in verse 2 he says that, ‘The Spirit of the Lord spoke’ to him, and he goes on to tell what God said to him.

David began his last words by reflecting on where he had come from. He was the son of Jesse, the youngest son, and a shepherd boy when he first heard the Lord’s call upon his life. Everyone told him he was just a boy who could do nothing to help the cause of God’s people but God’s hand was upon David, and he trusted in God even as a boy. If you are just a boy or a girl thinking you are of no use to God, think again. And you parents, think how to encourage your son or daughter to serve the Lord even from a young age. I was listening to a talk on Jonathan Edwards and the revival in his church in Northampton in the 1730’s. Apparently a boy of four declared his faith in Jesus and became a church member!

David was older than four but was still a boy looking after his father’s sheep when he stepped out in faith, trusting in the Lord to deliver him. He was still a boy looking after sheep when Samuel anointed him king of Israel. David remembers this anointing, and how God raised him up to be king after many years of running from King Saul. David became a great warrior king, but was also a great poet. Whatever ability or gift we have, let us be seeking to use it for God’s glory, not ours!

Speaking in the first person, David tells how ‘The Spirit of the Lord’ spoke to him such that he spoke the words of the Lord. This is the ministry of a prophet. Today we have God’s words here in the Bible, so speaking these words can be seen as prophesying. Remember the formula of the prophets: ‘Thus says the Lord’. So what did the God of Israel have to say to David? The ‘Rock of Israel’ spoke words for the king. The Lord had anointed and appointed David as king. He was king under God, who was the true King of Israel. As such a king, David was to uphold justice for all people (23:3). He was not to show partiality or take bribes, and not to oppress the poor. To the extent it was humanly possible, he was to look upon the heart, knowing that at his own anointing he prophet Samuel declared, ‘The Lord looks on the heart’ (1Sam 16:7).

‘The ruler of men must be just, ruling in the fear of God’ (23:3). Such a ruler will be like a light to his people; the people saw David as ‘the lamp of Israel’ (21:7). Many kings of Israel brought darkness to the land when they turned to other gods, to partiality and immorality. Still today, people in many nations live in the shadow of ungodly rulers rather than in the light of a ruler like David. We are praying for our rulers, ‘for kings and for all in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence’’ (1Tim 2:2). Our life is to be pleasing to God, and one of praising God within this peaceable society.

Light and life are features of a kingdom ruled by a just, god-fearing king. David’s word from the Lord likened the king’s rule to the light of the morning sun, and the grass sprouting after the rain (23:4). Psalm 72 speaks of the rule of a just and righteous king in terms of light, and grass growing after rain (Ps 72:5, 6). This psalm, like this last poem written by David, speaks of a greater king than David, namely Christ the King. Writing of the ‘Word become flesh’, John says, ‘In Him was life, and the life was the light of men’ (John 1:4). Jesus is the light of the world; in him is no darkness. The kingdom of God in which Jesus is king is the kingdom of light with no darkness. Darkness is what evil people like; light is what the people of God like, and what we find in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is also life: ‘In Him was life’. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. David’s picture of grass springing up after rain is most appropriate if we picture what it was like before the rain. Grass has an amazing capacity to make ‘compensatory growth’ after drought. We see fields coming to life after drought-breaking rains. If we appreciate this regeneration of the earth after rain, let us appreciate the regenerated life the Lord gives us when we come into his kingdom and come under the reign of Jesus Christ, our saviour and Lord.

The oracle of God comes to an end in verse 4, but the messianic theme continues. A better translation of verse 5 is in the form of a rhetorical question: ‘Is not my house established by God, and has he not made with me an everlasting covenant’ (23:5 NIV). David never forgot the Lord’s anointing, and especially not the covenant the Lord declared to him after he brought the Ark to Jerusalem. He wanted to build a physical house for the Lord but the Lord said that through David, he the Lord would build a house or dynasty for his name: ‘Your throne shall be established forever’ (2Sam 7:16). A descendant of David’s, namely Jesus of Nazareth, would sit upon the throne of the kingdom of God that transcends the physical Israel. This kingdom will be, or is, one of eternal salvation, of peace and of joy in the presence of King Jesus.

God made this covenant with David at a time when ‘the Lord had given him rest from his enemies all around’ (7:1). But that rest did not last. Till the end of his life David was fighting Philistines, as this very chapter shows. But the time will come, and indeed had come in Jesus Christ our King, when evil men and rebels will be cast out like thorns. Thorny bushes cannot be gathered with bare hands; a pitchfork, or in David’s case a long spear, is needed to pick up thorns and throw them into a heap to be burned (23:7).

Thorns appeared as God’s curse upon the ground following the Fall (Gen 3:18). They appear in the parable of the sower, choking the good seed. Ultimately, they appear as a crown on the head of Jesus. Jesus bore the curse of our sin as he died in our place on the cross; another symbol of divine cursing. Because Jesus took the curse and the penalty that was ours because of our sin, we can be forgiven and be free, free to live in the glorious light of our risen saviour and King.

Meanwhile those who turn their backs on Jesus and the cross are still under God’s curse, and, like the thorns spoken of by David, will be cast out and burned, utterly burned. David is of course, speaking of divine judgment. As king, David was called upon to rule with justice and his descendant will rule with ultimate justice, casting the wicked into the unquenchable fires of hell (Mat 25:41).

**2. More mighty men**

I say, ‘More mighty men’ because we have already been told of three men who disposed of Philistine giants back in chapter 21. They are not called ‘mighty men’ but one, Abishai, appears again here in chapter 23. David was a warrior king who inspired other men to fight against the enemies of Israel. They were both able and loyal mighty men, as we will see. The list begins with three who are named, and goes on to thirty others (23:9, 13).

These mighty men are often referred to in the context of a battle at harvest time because the Philistines and others came to burn crops or plunder the harvest. Josheb-Basshebeth or Adino the Eznite is listed because he killed eight hundred men in one battle. Eleazar the son of Dado, a Benjaminite, defied the Philistines even as Israel retreated. He fought until his hand was weary and ‘frozen’ to his sword (23:9). His fellow soldiers returned to plunder the dead Philistines. The third man listed is Shammah the son of Agee. The Philistines came to a field of lentils (‘barley’ in 1Chron 11:13) chasing off the Israelites. But this mighty man stood his ground in this field, killing Philistines until they retreated. As with Eleazar, the victory of Shammah is attributed to the Lord.

The listing of mighty men is interrupted to tell of how three of ‘the thirty chief men’ went down to David at the cave of Adullam, a place west of Bethlehem towards Gath, from where David at this time was again fighting the Philistines. The Philistines had apparently taken Bethlehem, David’s home town. Whether he was simply thirsty or was longing for his home town, or both, David said with longing, ‘Oh, that someone would give me a drink of water from the well of Bethlehem!’ (23:15). This request was unreasonable and selfish, given the circumstances. It is a story however, that demonstrates the loyalty and bravery of three of David’s men, men who are not even named. These three men risked their lives to break through enemy lines and fetch water from this well at Bethlehem for David.

What happens next is even stranger than David’s request. When these three loyal men brought the water to David he would not drink it but, ‘poured it out to the Lord’ (23:16). Recognising these men had risked their lives for him, David regarded this water a too precious to drink. It was in a sense more precious than wine that was usually offered with a sacrifice. David actually called this water the blood of these loyal men because they risked their lives to get it for him (23:17). We noted that the names of these three men are not recorded in history, but they were remembered by David, and by the Lord, as loyal and selfless servants of David.

This chapter continues on, listing the names of three more mighty men who were among the thirty. Abishai the brother of Joab appears again, this time killing three hundred of the enemy; not as many as Josheb-Basshebeth in the first group of three so he did not make the first group (23:8, 18, 19). Benaiah is also known to us as the leader of David’s bodyguard or mercenaries; he is noted for, among other feats, killing an Egyptian with his own spear, and a lion in a pit (23:20, 21).

Asahel, another of Joab’s brothers, heads the list of the thirty warriors (23:24). Only twenty-nine are listed, although verses 32 and 36 may refer to two each. If Joab is included, the number comes to thirty-seven (23:39). The final name is well known to us and to David; Uriah the Hittite was among David’s mighty men, until David had him killed to cover up his sin.

**David orders a census** Text: 2Samuel 24

The closing chapter of this book of 2Samuel records yet another of the sins of King David. As a boy, David trusted in the Lord, and he continued to trust in the Lord all his life. As the king of Israel, David usually prayed before going to fight the enemies of God’s people, and God gave him victory after victory. But like every man, David faced temptation and trials, and at times temptation led to sin. We have seen his life and his leadership fall apart when he committed adultery and tried to cover this up by killing Uriah the Hittite, a name that came up again at the end of the previous chapter.

David’s sin here is this chapter is not exactly clear, but it is certainly regarded as serious by the Lord. His adultery led to God striking his son, and many other consequences of course, but this sin led to the Lord striking seventy thousand people (24:15). There are three clear divisions in this chapter: ‘Census of Israel and Judah’, ‘Choice of divine punishment’ and, ‘Construction of altar and sacrifice’.

**1. Census of Israel and Judah**

In the first of these four closing chapters of 2Samuel, the Lord sent a famine upon the land because King Saul had broken a vow made to the Gibeonites. The natural disaster was more than ‘natural’; it was a message from the Lord. The Lord accepted David’s act of retribution, and heeded prayer for the land- and so ended the disaster. Chapter 24 begins with the word ‘again’, which presumably refers back to chapter 21 and that disaster, although there is no explicit reference to the Lord being angry at that time. Here in chapter 24 the Lord is angry but no specific reason is given; all we are told is that the Lord was angry at Israel and moved or incited David against them (24:1). In his anger the Lord moved David to take a census of Israel and Judah that would result in disaster for the nation.

A census was not evil in itself, as seen in the book of Numbers chapter 1, but in this case it was. In this case it was David ordering the census, not the Lord. Was David now trusting in the size of his army rather than trusting in the Lord? This is similar to what happened when the people asked for a king; they wanted to be like other nations, but the Lord did not get angry at that time. He told Samuel to give them a king.

The question as to why David ordered this census is answered in the text, but it is a most perplexing answer: ‘The Lord moved David against them’. But the Lord does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13-15). Turning to a parallel passage in 1Chronicles, we read that it was Satan who moved David to number Israel (1Chron 21:1). As the adversary, Satan is always tempting God’s people- look at Adam and Eve- and so we understand this reference to Satan moving David to sin, but our text says, or implies, that the Lord moved or incited David! If we turn to the book of Job, we see interaction between God and Satan in the ‘heavenly court’, and the disasters and suffering that came upon Job. Job saw his affliction as being the hand of God upon him because he was not privy to this ‘heavenly court’. While the inciting of David is not exactly the same as the affliction of Job, there is a parallel in as much as man does not see into the ‘heavenly court’. God is sovereign over all things and all other beings on earth and in heaven. Moreover, God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9) and his purposes stretch into eternity.

Having been ‘supernaturally’ moved to take this census, David told Joab, the commander of the army, to go through all the tribes of Israel counting the number of people, that is the number of fighting men (24:2,9). Joab would have been unaware of David being supernaturally moved to take a census. He probably thought David was doing this out of pride. Would David boast to his neighbours of the size of his army, as Hezekiah boasted of his treasures? (Isa 39).

Joab seems to understand that this census was not necessary and would actually anger the Lord. He urged David to trust in the Lord, who could add men as he wished; he could also take men away! Gideon’s experience of the Lord determining the size of his army is noteworthy.

Joab was a powerful general, but in this case the king’s word prevailed. So Joab and his officers went off to count the people of Israel. They went across the Jordan and up north towards Dan. They then went south, all the way to Beersheba. It took these army officers over nine months to complete what was seemingly an administrator’s task. If they had been called to fight the Philistines in the meantime it would have taken much longer. Joab brought David his report: eight hundred thousand in Israel and five hundred thousand in Judah who could be called upon to fight. David had a standing army, as well as a bodyguard of mercenaries, but most soldiers were what we call reservists.

As soon as the census results were given to David he was overcome with guilt. Satan and sin always promise more than they deliver. David’s lust for Bathsheba led to momentary pleasure but ongoing guilt. Despite the advice of Joab, David insisted on conducting this census, but then felt guilty for what he had done. He had not prayed about it, and seemingly acted out of pride and self-glory. But guilt lead to prayer and repentance, with David confessing to the Lord that he had acted foolishly and committed a great sin (24:10). He did not try to cover up this sin or minimise it. As pointed out, taking a census was not in itself a sin but in this case it was a ‘weighty’ sin, as David admits.

**2.Choice of divine punishment**

The next day David was visited by the prophet Gad. Gad brought a word from the Lord. Just as David’s heart condemned him, now he hears words of condemnation from the Lord. It is interesting that the Lord gives David a choice of punishments, not unlike his own offer to the Gibeonites of choosing what they wanted from Israel by way of atonement (21:3). The Lord told David to choose from: three years of famine in the land, three months of running from enemies, or three days of a deadly plague (24:13). Any of these would involve suffering and death in the land. David will later call for the Lord to punish him and not the people, although back in verse 1 we read that the Lord’s anger was against Israel; it was now against David of course!

David’s choice of punishment is interesting because of the reason he gives. He knew the Lord to be merciful, more merciful than man (24:14). Enemy soldiers did not show mercy when they killed. Man’s inhumanity to man was seen in David’s day and continues unimpeded today. Remember the brutality threatened by Nahash the Ammonite that led to Saul rising up to defend the people of Jabesh Gilead; he was going to poke out the right eye of everyone in the city (1Sam 11:1). Remember also the actual brutality of the Japanese in WW2, and of Putin today.

Dying from famine would be a slow death, so David chose three days of plague. Whatever disease this was, it was sudden and fatal. Even before this short time was over, seventy thousand of the men who David had just counted were dead. Boasting in riches or possessions often comes at a cost, namely the Lord removing these riches or possessions in a disaster of some kind. Remember the warning of Jesus in Matthew 6:19 about rust and moths destroying treasure and thieves stealing such things. If David was boasting of the size of his army, it was now reduced in size by five percent.

David was right to choose on the basis of the Lord being merciful because when the ‘destroying’ angel stretched his hand over Jerusalem the Lord was grieved at the destruction and said, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand’ (24:16). And so the plague stopped at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. It seems that David was at this place or nearby because he saw the ‘destroying’ angel and cried to the Lord.

Guilt and grief overcame David as he saw men dying because of his sin. He cried to the Lord to punish him and not the people, the ‘sheep’ the Lord had put under his care (24:17). It may have been in answer to David’s prayer of humility, and indeed self-sacrifice, that the Lord relented from the destruction he had ordained. Moreover, ‘In David’s willingness to suffer in place of his sheep we catch a glimpse of the greater shepherd- king to come (Mat 2:6, 25:32-34) who would lay down his life for his sheep’.

**3. Construction of altar for a sacrifice**

The prophet again spoke to David saying, ‘Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite’ (24:18). This site was significant as the place where the terrible plague stopped. It also became the site where Solomon built the temple, as indicated in 1Chronicles 22:1; some scholars see this whole account in the context of the building of the temple but there is nothing in the text before us connecting it to the building of the temple. David was told by the prophet to build an altar to the Lord at the place where this terrible plague was stopped. The death toll of seventy thousand was greater than in Israel’s war with the Philistines (1Sam 4:10 =30,000) and their civil war (18:7 =20,000); did David make the right choice?

The owner of this threshing floor was surprised to see the king of Israel coming but welcomed him appropriately. David explained that he wanted to buy this man’s threshing floor for the purpose of constructing an altar to the Lord (24:21). Araunah offered to give David the land, as well as his oxen and implements, but David said he must buy it for a price (24:22-24). It was not uncommon in those days to build an altar to the Lord at a site of significance (Gen 12:8, 28:18, Judges 6:26, 1Sam 7:17). We do not offer blood sacrifices today so do not build altars. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord did away with such worship. Nor do we pour holy oil or water over images in a ritual not commanded in the Bible.

David lived a thousand years before Christ, and he was actually told by the prophet of God to build this altar and offer burnt offering and peace offerings. In a burnt offering the animal was completely consumed by way of atonement for unintentional sin, while a peace offering was an expression of thanksgiving or worship. While we read of this altar being built, ‘That the plague may be withdrawn’ (24:21), the plague had already been stopped (24:16). This altar and the sacrifice were by way of atonement and thanksgiving or worship, as commanded by the Lord.

If you find this action of David, and the Lord’s heavy hand of punishment upon the land hard to understand, we close with a lesson that is easy to understand. Araunah wanted to give David his land but David insisted on buying it because, as he said, ‘I will not offer… to the Lord my God that which cost me nothing’ (24:24). If you want to put money you find on the footpath into the collection by all means do so, but do not hold back the offering from your pay-packet. Besides, do not bring any winnings from gambling! In India the collection plate was often filled with dirty and torn currency notes that were refused in shops. Our offering to the Lord should be the first part taken from our pay-packet not the last. The apostle Paul praised the poorest of Christians who were giving liberally or generously to the work of the Lord (2Cor 8:2).

If David would not give to the Lord that which cost him nothing neither should we. Rather, recognising the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, ‘though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor’, let our giving be a sacrifice of money, as well as time and labour, to the Lord.

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