

BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week One: Answer To A Mother's Prayer (1 Samuel 1:1-2:11)

The books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel describe a period of significant change. In 1 Samuel, the era of the judges comes to an end: Samuel first serves for a time as prophet, priest and judge; then a permanent kingship is established, beginning with Saul's erratic reign. In 2 Samuel, king David brings some hope, yet a series of rivals undermines Israel's stability and identity.

In both books, the actions and attitudes of individuals share the stage with events on a larger scale. At times, an individual's faith or lack of faith can affect the lives of many others. Yet ultimately each person is individually accountable for his or her own actions, not those of anyone else. No human, even the most powerful ruler or the most persuasive spiritual leader, will ever be able to make our spiritual choices for us.

When we weigh the influence of an individual versus the course of history, there is a strong temptation to oversimplify. Some commentators erroneously think that 1 Samuel and several other books teach that things always go well for Israel when the people are faithful, and that the nation is always punished when they are not. This shallow, flesh-pleasing perspective is often called 'Deuteronomic history', based on a misinterpretation of passages like Deuteronomy 28.

Likewise, our society is no different than any other in teaching us carefully selected myths, with techniques that have proven effective in convincing its members to accept those myths. Thus these are widely accepted even by believers. But the Scriptures teach us (at least when we set aside our personal desires and preconceptions) to turn away from all such simplistic explanations or convenient theories, and instead to turn to God in faith and humility.

The true focus of 1 Samuel is, rather, that "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

The interaction between individual faith and the lives of others arises right away in 1 Samuel. Hannah, a woman of faith and devotion who is distressed by the insensitivity of those close to her, appeals fervently for God to grant her a child (1 Samuel 1:1-18). She promises to give her firstborn son right back to the Lord in devoted service. She is blessed in this plea by the well-meaning but weak priest Eli - an ironic incident in light of future events.

Many persons make promises similar to Hannah's, but this faithful mother is true to her word (1:19-28). Recognizing that her son has been born through God's graciousness in hearing her plea, she names the boy Samuel ("heard by God" in Hebrew). Even in his childhood, she entrusts him to Eli, who will help prepare Samuel for a life devoted to ministry.

Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving (2:1-11) also shows her faith and understanding. No one is holy like God, no one is strong like God, and no one is wise like God. Whether we are concerned with personal matters or world events, it is always to God alone that we should look for comfort, understanding, and hope.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009*

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Week Two: Two Families (1 Samuel 2:12-4:1)

God's gracious answer to Hannah's prayer for a son was also an act of grace upon Israel, since Samuel's life of selfless ministry would bless everyone. His steady hand would often protect them from the worst, even from problems entirely of their own making. Though the Israelites barely understood or appreciated Samuel, he never wavered in his faithfulness to God or in his concern for others. But another family in Israel had a less beneficial influence.

Eli the priest is well-meaning but ineffective, and his two sons are guilty of the most blatant abuses of their responsibilities (2:12-17, 2:22-25). In using their positions for gain and for pleasure, they are little different from humans in every age and era. One of the recurring myths of human society is that 'leaders' need special privileges to insulate them from the more tedious aspects of life. This arrogant attitude soon leads to the kinds of abuses Eli's sons are committing.

As believers, we cannot change the fact that worldly leaders of every kind receive praise and privilege that they do not deserve. But we can make sure that the body of believers values faithful service and selfless sacrifice, not privilege, status, or human power.

In contrast, young Samuel and his faithful mother quietly live by faith (2:18-21, 2:26). This was not a pleasant time for those who sought God sincerely, yet this faithful family simply concentrates on what they can do in faith. Hannah fulfills her promise to God, doing all that she can do to prepare her son for a life of faithful service. For his part, God provides her with a wealth of children in the place of her firstborn, whose devotion to God will bless a nation.

God now decides that the time has come to remove Eli's family from the priesthood (2:27-36). Though this is no surprise, note some important points. It comes only after a long pattern of abuse and spiritual deception, and even now God's actions are less of a punishment on the wrongdoers than it is a spiritual necessity for the sake of others. Further, Eli's sinful sons are not the whole problem. Eli's ineffective pleas for them to 'stop it' mirror the pointless ways that persons of every era try to look righteous without taking any meaningful action. In our day, we all tend to blame the rich and powerful for problems caused by our own fleshly desires.

It is not long before God reveals his intentions to both Eli and Samuel (3:1-4:1). It is an interesting scene: the innocent Samuel repeatedly mistakes God's call for Eli's voice, while Eli suddenly realizes the role that Samuel will play when God brings down Eli's own family. Above all, notice how it is God who takes the full initiative when it is time for things to change. Samuel does not put himself forward as a leader, nor does Eli (who has some truly good qualities) fight against God's decision to remove him.

We would do well to reject the aggressiveness of pagan society, and to adopt this kind of truly faithful attitude. None of us is righteous enough to warrant claims of leadership or authority, and none of us is justified in demanding immediate change, no matter how bad things are. Genuine faith in God can severely tax human patience, yet it allows God's far greater wisdom to prevail.

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Week Three: The Ark Of God Amidst Unbelievers (1 Samuel 4:1-5:12)

As the opening chapters of 1 Samuel describe, the established leaders of Israel are causing spiritual harm. So God has chosen young, faithful Samuel as the starting point for a new beginning. We shall now see the catalyst God uses for a traumatic but necessary transition.

First, the hostile Philistines inflict a painful defeat upon Israel (4:1-3). Human nature being what it is in every era, the people look for a simple explanation for the loss that will not require humility or genuine change. They decide that the ark of the covenant will make things better next time. A symbol of God's presence among his people, the ark seems at first to be the answer.

So the ark is brought into the Israelite camp, as everyone cheers (4:4-5). The worldly reaction - viewing a symbol of holiness as a mere good luck charm to bring earthly victories - points out how little human nature changes over the centuries. It is the people who need to change, not the circumstances. They need understanding and a sense of responsibility, not excitement or quick fixes. So too, today's church does not need slogans, methods, or personalities. It needs God.

The Philistines are at first intimidated, but then grimly prepare for the next battle, and they again defeat Israel (4:6-11). Before the battle, Eli's two disreputable sons bring in the ark, to the roars of the crowd - but by the end of the day they both lie dead, and the ark has been captured. This is the fruit of reliance on worldly things, no matter how spiritual our pretexts for trusting in them may seem. There was nothing deficient about the ark in itself; but it was only a symbol with no magical powers. The people should instead have looked in humility to God himself.

This latest loss brings gloom in Israel (4:12-22). Yet, as painful as it is for everyone, this is mere worldly sorrow. It is easy to feel empathy for Eli, and the old priest also shows his sincerity by being even more devastated by the loss of the ark than by his personal sorrows. Yet neither he nor anyone else grasps what really has happened. This is a necessary defeat, and God in his grace has already prepared for their recovery.

Meanwhile, the Philistines grab the ark as a trophy of war, only to find it a hazard (5:1-12). Wherever they put the ark, God brings disruption and trouble, demonstrating the vulnerability of their idols and their human strength. This too parallels contemporary events. Humans from athletes to politicians to celebrities use God to support fleshly attitudes and activities, and all too often believers are eager to see our God take a place among secular society's idols. But this is not what he desires - he is the only God, and in the long run he will put to shame all pretenders.

In these events, we see the ark - the symbol of God's presence - taken by unbelievers from a group of false believers. The lesson for us is to stop viewing God as a quick fix or as a handy pretext for serving our fleshly desires. If we as believers trust in superficial things, how can we not expect unbelievers also to view God in superficial terms? But if we truly trust in God himself, and in his living presence among us, then ultimately others may see this too.

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Week Four: The Return Of God's Presence (1 Samuel 6:1-7:17)

In ancient Israel, the ark of the covenant symbolized God's presence. Now, the Philistines have defeated Israel in battle, and have seized the ark as a victory trophy. Possession of the ark brings nothing but trouble to the Philistines, but its departure from Israel is symbolically significant: it parallels how the Israelites had lost sight of God's presence among them. Even the ark itself had become a mere mascot or good luck charm. Now the slow process of spiritual rebuilding begins.

While Israel wallows in gloom over its defeat, the Philistines come to the sensible conclusion that they would do well to return the ark of God to Israel (6:1-12). In fact, the unbelieving Philistines have come to treat the ark with much more respect than the Israelites did. They not only ask nothing in exchange for its return, but even send it back with a considerable amount of gold, which they view as a 'guilt offering'. They do not even dare to carry it themselves, but instead load it onto a cattle cart and simply watch as the cows drag it back to Israel.

How often do we also see pagans grasp implications of spirituality that so-called Christians want to deny? We all have a choice - which no one can ever make for us - whether to live for this life or to live in the hope that a more lasting world awaits us. The pagans have made a foolish, but honest, choice to enjoy themselves now, and to hope that there is nothing after death. Thus they may have a healthy awe of death's finality, and they may tremble during those isolated moments when they sense and fear God's reality.

By contrast, Jesus repeatedly says that the next world is the one that lasts, and that the next life is the one that matters; but it is often clear from our words and deeds that we're more concerned with being victorious and prosperous right now. We often take heaven, salvation, and eternity for granted, impatiently expecting God to fill our earthly lives with pleasure and excitement.

Now the ark goes back to Israel, symbolically restoring God's presence - yet with a sobering reminder (6:13-7:1). When the ark shows up in the town of Beth Shemesh, its residents at first respond appropriately, with joy, sacrifice, and praise. But they are still a long way from having the right attitude. When their fleshly curiosity overcomes their spiritual perspective, they can't resist seeing what is inside the ark. God strikes down seventy of them as a warning, which we also should heed. We too can become overly interested in disputable matters - even when we are accidentally 'right' about such things, it produces pride and complacency, not spiritual growth.

Yet despite his people's flaws, God brings them a long period of peace and growth (7:2-17). Samuel's faith and devotion make him a source of strength and godly encouragement, and he makes sure to use any victory as an opportunity to praise God. The people do not deserve such a selfless servant, but they need him - and by grace they have him. We too are never remotely as 'spiritual' as we think we are, either. Yet God provides us with all we need, too. Once we accept that all we have comes by grace, we too can experience undeserved but wonderful blessings.

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Week Five: A Fateful Decision (1 Samuel 8:1-22)

By God's grace, Samuel has become for Israel a faithful priest and judge, in place of Eli's faithless sons. This gives the Israelites a period of peace and security, which provides them also with an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Unfortunately, they draw the wrong 'lessons' from the past, just as believers in every era have tendency to do.

Samuel served God and his people well and faithfully, but his sons are faithless and irresponsible (8:1-3). Samuel unwittingly repeats Eli's mistake, by putting undeserved confidence in his sons. Unlike Eli, Samuel was chosen because of his faithful heart, not because of a legal regulation. But like Eli, he sought to pass on his responsibilities by human descent instead of by faith. That does not make Samuel guilty of the problems that now arise; it is simply a sobering reminder that even the most faithful persons may have blind spots about matters that lie too close to home.

The Israelites perceive that Samuel's sons should not be in positions of spiritual responsibility, but they choose a much worse option (8:4-5). The correct lesson is that any human being is highly fallible, and even more so in a position of power. Instead, they think that the problem lies merely in the structure of their community. They wish to do away with the informal guidance of priests, prophets, and judges, and to replace it with a king, a strong ruler, "such as all the other nations have". This longing to be like the world is a disorder that also afflicts believers today.

Their request for a king distresses Samuel - and more importantly, it displeases God (8:6-18). As God now says through Samuel, human beings are not fit to have power and authority over one another, and they invariably exploit and oppress one another at the slightest opportunity. Nor is this a failing only of monarchical forms of government - our own 'democratic' society is also full of petty tyrants who abuse their positions and revel in their privileges. Only our society's incessant propaganda and self-promotion keeps us all from seeing how pervasive this problem is.

The people, though, do not listen either to Samuel or to God (8:19-22). And God does for them what he always does for self-willed humans on this earth: he lets them have what they desire. It may take a long time for them to realize their mistake, and many of them may never admit their error, but in any case God is not going to lower himself to a battle of wills with mere flesh-and-blood creatures. Even when our faithfulness fails, his compassion, patience, and wisdom remain.

Human self-will is always a dangerous obstacle to a healthy relationship with God. Human nature reacts to failure, fear, or disappointment by trying to control circumstances ourselves, or by manipulating one another in the hope that our selfish desires might prevail. How often does our society draw the wrong 'lessons' from a disaster, a 'crisis', or a scandal? More importantly, how often does the church react to its struggles and needs by seeking programs, slogans, or aggressive 'leaders', "such as all the other churches have"? If we would just humble ourselves, and accept that the real solutions are found only in God, we could save ourselves a lot of trouble.

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Week Six: Israel Gets Its Wish (1 Samuel 9:1-10:27)

Facing the prospect of Samuel's unworthy sons becoming influential leaders, the people of Israel have asked God to appoint a king over them, to make them like the pagan nations. This wish is understandable from a fleshly viewpoint, but wrong from a spiritual perspective. Knowing that this stubborn desire for an earthly king is too strong to overcome by other means, God instructs Samuel to give them what they have asked for - in more ways than one.

God chooses the Benjamite Saul to be the new king (9:1-2). Saul is "impressive" and physically imposing. These characteristics have nothing to do with being a good king, but they are the kind of superficial qualities that the Israelites are looking for. God in his grace gives them what they wish for, and he will let them see their mistakes for what they are.

How extraordinarily patient God is, and how sad it is that we so sorely tax his patience with our stubborn self-will. Today's churches are no more willing to let God reign than the ancient Israelites were. God allows us to play with our methods and programs, and to revel in the tiny successes they may bring. But once in a while we actually humble ourselves, and we realize that we cannot plan or orchestrate spiritual growth - and these moments are priceless to God. In those few moments, we have the chance to experience Christianity as it is meant to be.

God's arrangement for Saul and Samuel to meet might at first seem convoluted (9:3-10:8). The various details in this account are not important in themselves, yet there are reasons why the narrative goes into such detail. By the time that Saul (who had left home merely to find some lost donkeys) meets Samuel, he has been taken out of any familiar places or routines. Samuel, also, must wait for the person God sends, rather than using his own judgment to select a king. (We'll see this again with David in chapter 16.)

God knows Saul's flaws, and will later replace him, but he gives him an honest chance to be a worthy king. Saul will have no doubt that the kingship was given him by grace, not because he had earned it. Both Saul and the Israelites have a genuine chance to make this arrangement work - so if and when it fails, it will be their own fault. Likewise, God gives us chance after chance to learn from our mistakes. Whatever worldly disadvantages we may face, God always supplies us with all that we need spiritually. Thus our spiritual well-being is always our own responsibility.

In fact, Saul starts out with a most appropriate attitude of humility (10:9-27). He does not boast to his family about the high position he soon will have. When he is presented to Israel as king, he is shy and retiring. Even when a faction of soreheads opposes him, he refrains from threats or anger. If he had kept this perspective, then his reign could have been a real blessing for Israel.

But a good start means little in spiritual matters. The world seeks quick results and instant change, but God looks only at the heart, which by its nature is slow to make genuine changes that last. Saul has what the world seeks, but he will prove sadly lacking in spiritual stamina.

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Week Seven: Transition To A New Era (1 Samuel 11:1-12:25)

The anointing of a king was against the wishes of Samuel and of God himself. But the Lord and his faithful servant both support Israel's new ruler, and ensure that his reign is firmly established. If Saul succeeds, so much the better, since God's people would be blessed through him. If he fails, it will be due to his own faults and mistakes, because God will give him all that he needs.

Saul's first test comes when the Ammonites bully and threaten Jabesh Gilead (11:1-5). Saul's main strength was his tendency to act decisively when needed, so he quickly assembles a rescue force (11:6-10). This kind of firm action is what the Israelites had wanted when they asked for a king, and in this case it turns out to be what the situation calls for. Later, unfortunately, they will find that Saul also tends to take firm action when the situation calls for patience and faith instead.

Right now, Saul is the man for the job. His plan succeeds easily; he rescues the threatened town and is also quite humble about his victory (11:11-15). After an easy defeat of the Ammonites, many of the people remember the troublemakers who tried to undermine Saul when he was made king. When Saul's fans want to kill these malcontents, the king graciously forgives them, not wanting to spoil a day of celebration. This whole sequence of events shows Saul at his best.

With Saul established on the throne of a new kingdom, Samuel realizes that it is time for him to leave the stage (12:1-5). He begins his farewell talk with a reminder of his years of service to Israel. He mentions his integrity and honesty not in order to obtain praise, but to remind everyone that these qualities - not strength, appearance, or talent - are the most important qualifications for anyone in a position of responsibility.

Then Samuel reminds them of some important lessons from their history (12:6-11). When they have been faithful, God has always been there to give them what they needed. And when they have been faithless, God has still always been there to give them what they needed. Sometimes they needed protection, sometimes they needed discipline, sometimes they needed to be taught. God always gave them what they needed, whether they 'deserved' it or not.

God does the same for us, and we would do well to set aside our superficial preconceptions about 'reward' and 'punishment' from God. He loves us enough always to give us what we need: sometimes this means blessing the faithful; sometimes it means blessing the faithless. Sometimes this means allowing the faithless to undergo hardship or struggle; sometimes it means allowing the faithful to undergo hardship or struggle. Once we set aside our shallow human notions of 'justice', we can see God's ways more clearly.

Finally, Samuel reminds them that their craving for an earthly king was foolish and ungodly (12:12-25). Yet, true to his own nature, God will give them the chance to use the situation in a positive manner. The same is true for us. Any present situation is always the result of a complicated combination of choices, many of them foolish, a few of them wise. We can never change the past; we can only learn from it. So all that God asks is for us to move forward, without blame or reproach, but with simple faith.

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Week Eight: Trouble With The Philistines, Trouble With God (1 Samuel 13:1-15)

Saul has passed his earliest tests as king with no difficulty. He has defended the nation against its enemies, and has dealt graciously with those who had opposed him. These challenges allowed him to use his strengths, just as both God and the people had expected of him. When another problem arises with the Philistines, it seems again as if Saul will be able to deal with it. But this time it will expose a grave spiritual weakness in Israel's king.

Saul organizes the nation militarily, dividing the generalship between himself and his son Jonathan (13:1-2). This, again, is just what the Israelites had wished for: their strong king and his heir apparent, leading powerful armies of flesh and blood, ready to take on the rest of the world. So God lets them have it - and he will let them see that it is at best a mixed blessing.

With thousands of soldiers standing around waiting for a battle, fighting inevitably breaks out (13:3-7). Saul's son Jonathan, given an army of his own to play with, attacks a Philistine outpost. This in turn provokes reprisals from the Philistines (who were always looking for an excuse to fight anyway). Suddenly, the excitement in Israel turns to fear, as the Israelites realize that they have incited a fierce foe to take action.

The people had once longed fondly for a king to lead them into battle; but now they suddenly remember urgent business elsewhere, hiding anyplace that offers the slightest protection. Thus their worldly longings are revealed for what they are. So too, many of the church's vain cravings for worldly success may sound fine when cloaked with religious-sounding rationalizations; but they ring hollow when we run up against the harsh realities of a world set on its own desperate agendas. We must always remember that Jesus said, "my kingdom is not of this world".

At this tense moment, Saul commits his first grievous lapse of spiritual judgment (13:8-15). Expecting Samuel to come and offer an appropriate sacrifice before going into battle, Saul either becomes impatient to start the battle, or becomes desperate to demonstrate his leadership, or perhaps a combination of both. He presumes to offer the sacrifice himself, initiating a chain of events that will lose him the kingship and that will bring uproar and disorder to Israel.

Why was Saul so harshly rebuked for this action? Was it just because he was not a Levite? No, because Samuel himself, whose sacrifices pleased God, was an Ephraimite, not a Levite. Rather, Saul blasphemed by handling things he did not understand. He viewed the holy offering merely as one more task to be dealt with, and thus he acted as the man of action that he was. The world may praise this kind of aggressive deed, but God does not.

The same qualities that helped Saul win battles and friends now lead him into trouble. Likewise, when we import worldly methods and perspectives into the church, they may bring results, but the results will not please God. The situation was difficult, but in God's eyes this does not excuse Saul's error. He thought of the sacrifice merely as a necessary task or a public relations function. Thus God will replace Saul with someone whose heart is set on God himself, not on outward actions or achievements.

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Week Nine: Tumult & Confusion (1 Samuel 13:16-14:52)

After some early successes that allowed Saul to use his strengths, the new king has begun to reveal deep spiritual flaws. In the long run, humility and genuine faithfulness always prove more important than worldly victories, human intelligence, or fleshly abilities. For Israel, a tumultuous period has begun, in which victories and defeats seem to be confusingly intertwined.

As tensions increase between the Israelites and the Philistines, a strange situation arises (13:16-23). Israel has allowed the Philistines to obtain a monopoly on the blacksmith trade at a most inopportune moment. Thus, in any battle that may arise in the near future, the Philistines will have a considerable advantage in weaponry. This is not what the Hebrew people had expected when they asked God to let them become more like the other nations.

Saul's impetuous but faithful son Jonathan now becomes the catalyst for a fast-moving series of events (14:1-14). With the situation at a standstill, Jonathan takes an armor-bearer and issues a challenge to a Philistine outpost. The complacent Philistines do not expect Jonathan's forceful attack, and they are thrown into confusion, while the two Israelites inflict heavy casualties.

It is interesting to compare Jonathan's hasty attack with Saul's rash sacrifice in chapter 13. Both attempted to deal with an apparently stagnant situation by decisive action; yet God blesses and uses Jonathan's actions, while he rebuked Saul. Sometimes, direct action is the godly way to deal with things; at other times, we should simply be patient and wait for God. There are no easy or superficial 'rules' to go by, and each of us must submit our fleshly impulses to the will of God.

God uses Jonathan's small-scale attack to throw the entire Philistine army into confusion and panic (14:15-23). Jonathan is an interesting and tragic character in 1 Samuel, torn between his impulsive nature and his basic faithfulness, and later torn between his loyalty to his father and his friendship with David. Sometimes, Jonathan does some wonderful things. Unfortunately, he never makes a clean break from his worldly nature, and eventually he will die an ignominious death in a pointless battle.

What should have been a victory is turned into a distressing situation by one of Saul's acts of rashness (14:24-46). When Jonathan quite sensibly eats some wild honey to strengthen himself, he unknowingly violates an impulsive oath that Saul had made, binding his army not to eat anything. There was no reason for him to make such an oath; it was just Saul's desperate attempt to grab control of the situation by "doing something". While constant action often seems good at the time, in the long run it always works against our spiritual well-being.

Although Saul continued to enjoy one military success after another, under Saul and his family Israel would find neither peace nor spiritual growth (14:47-52). The Israelites wanted to be like the rest of the world, and now they must eat the bitter fruit of their decision. Let us, instead, learn to rejoice in being "aliens and strangers on earth" (Hebrews 11:13). The world's methods, its leaders, and its values will all come to nothing. Will we trust God when he tells us this, or will we force him to teach us this lesson in a painful and time-consuming fashion?

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Week Ten: Worldly Success, Spiritual Failure (1 Samuel 15:1-35)

King Saul has worldly strengths but spiritual weaknesses, resulting in a confusing time for the Israelites. The Israelites themselves are also much to blame. Their fleshly attitudes and selfish expectations have made a bad combination with the king's personal flaws. This next incident again highlights the contrast between spiritual perspectives and fleshly viewpoints.

With the Philistines temporarily subdued, God directs Saul's attention to the Amalekites (15:1-3). This nation historically oppressed and harmed the Israelites (and other neighbors) whenever the chance arose, and they also enthusiastically practiced violent and sadistic forms of idolatry. God asks Saul to deal with them harshly, not only to punish a vicious nation that presented a constant danger to others, but he also to give Saul a last chance to show himself faithful.

The task at hand calls for firm and unyielding force, which should allow Saul to use his strengths. Indeed, the battle is won with ease, but afterwards Saul decides to retain the best of the Amalekites' possessions for himself (15:4-9), rather than destroying everything as God had instructed him to do. God had desired for the violent, hate-filled Amalekites to be completely removed from the earth - but Saul even took Agag, their hateful, ruthless king, alive. (In itself, this was normal in the ancient world, since a captured king could be ransomed for a high price.)

God is displeased with Saul's willful disobedience (15:10-13). Saul even erects a monument to himself (verse 12b), losing all sight of God's presence. Yet he has no problem giving glib answers to Samuel's concerns (15:14-21), since what Saul has done can easily be defended by human logic. So too, when Christians and churches flirt with worldly values and methods, when they take undue interest in secular affairs, it is always easy to rationalize these things with phony religious-sounding logic. The flesh always loves results, popularity, and convenience, especially when it can feel 'spiritual' at the same time.

But God's values are entirely different (15:15:22-35). From any earthly perspective, Saul has won a great victory - but from a spiritual perspective, he could hardly be in worse condition. God values humility and trust far above fleshly accomplishments and activities. Saul's self-confidence and self-will are admirable to the worldly mind, but Samuel compares them to practices like idolatry and sorcery, since all of these things deny God's sovereignty and holiness.

Saul's main concern is still for himself and for what others think of him (verse 30 is frightening, but it is an attitude that a lot of Christians and churches have). Samuel must finish what Saul has left undone, and he informs Saul that God will remove him as king. Take a look at verse 35, for it is something that we would never want God to say about us.

Which would you prefer - for our nation to find a quick solution to its current problems so that you can stop worrying, or for yourself to become devoted to a more regular and meaningful study of God's Word? Which would you prefer - to be part of a large, successful church that impresses your friends, or to be part of an obscure congregation that courageously stands up even for the less popular teachings of the gospel? To each of these questions, Saul would make the former choice - and God would infinitely prefer the latter. Whose perspective do you share?

BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Eleven: A New Anointing (1 Samuel 16:1-23)

Saul's poor spiritual judgment and fleshly perspective have convinced God to find another king for Israel. Although the people's desire for a king was wrong and foolish, God nevertheless gave Saul every opportunity to make things work. Saul had the worldly attributes that fleshly humans seek in their leaders, but he lacked spiritual understanding, since his faith was quite shallow. The next king, whom Samuel is now sent to anoint, will have the qualities God values most.

Saul was such a disappointment as king that even the faithful Samuel has become despondent and fearful (16:1-3). God must first encourage him with the news that he has chosen a replacement for Saul, and then must exhort Samuel not to fear Saul's anger. It is easy for any honest Christian to sympathize with Samuel. Acts of faith often go unrewarded in this world, and indeed they may even be punished by those with earthly wealth and power. But, like Samuel, we must simply trust God's guidance, and be ready to follow him wherever he leads us.

God directs Samuel to the home of Jesse in Bethlehem, where God will reveal the future king (16:4-13). Once more, even Samuel has a hard time seeing God's will. Jesse's older sons all have imposing physiques and an air of confidence about them, but God emphatically tells the prophet that, "the Lord does not look at the things man looks at". David's youth, small size, and innocent appearance make him an afterthought even to his own father. But God has chosen him because his heart is seeking the truth, and this far outweighs any qualities that the world values.

Such a simple lesson, and yet how resistant to it even believers can be. We often seek the same things in our leaders that the pagans like, instead of valuing simple spiritual fruit. Saul's example shows that one can be successful in worldly terms (in our context, a church can have plenty of money and numerical growth) and yet have failed completely in God's eyes. Remember too that David would go on to make some serious mistakes, and yet even so God remained with him because of David's humble repentance.

God not only chooses David to be the new king, but also provides an opportunity for him (16:14-23). As one of Saul's attendants, David will come to know Saul, and he will also become familiar with many of the issues and problems that affect the nation. Note too that David also administers God's grace to Saul, by playing the harp to ease Saul's inner torment. God cannot let Saul continue as king, but he still loves the poor lost soul, and shows him mercy when he can.

We also see that God's plans are made far in advance. Samuel has already anointed David as king (verse 13), but it will be quite a while before David assumes this position in actuality. There is quite a parallel here, emphasized by the practice of anointing. Jesus was anointed by God as our Savior long before he came to this earth - and we too have received an anointing (see, for example, 2 Corinthians 1:21 and 1 John 2:20-27). We already belong to God forever, and already we no longer belong to this fallen world. We thus can start living that way now.

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BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Twelve: Battling A Giant (1 Samuel 17:1-58)

God has anointed young David son of Jesse as Israel's next king, but it will be some time before he actually assumes that responsibility. In the meantime, plenty is going on. King Saul's poor spiritual condition isn't improving, and the Philistines - recovered from their earlier losses - are back for more trouble. Things don't look promising, but God will use the situation positively.

Once more there is a tense stand-off between the Israelites and the Philistines (17:1-11). This time, the Philistines have a special weapon, the fearsome giant Goliath. This bully repeatedly challenges Israel to choose its own man for a one-on-one, winner-take-all fight with the huge Philistine. Of course, no one can imagine anyone being able to overpower such a formidable warrior - while if no one accepts the challenge, Israel's morale will just get worse and worse.

Once, Saul might have been able to rise to the occasion, but now he is paralyzed with fear, no longer trusting in God and no longer trusting in himself. We can easily identify with Saul's terror, at least from a fleshly viewpoint. Many obstacles we face also seem gigantic and impossible to overcome. Indeed, all of us will face dangers at some point that truly are beyond our power to handle. Times like these reveal where our faith is - and now, someone who has the perspective that allows God to work will arrive on the scene.

David (shuttling back-and-forth between responsibilities at home and his service to Saul) now arrives at the battlefield, and he reacts much differently to Goliath's bluster (17:12-37). Where others saw a threat and hoped it would just go away, David saw his own responsibility before God. He realized the threat was serious, but he also knew that God, not himself, could meet it.

David successfully deals with Goliath because did not deal with the giant on Goliath's own level (17:38-54). When Saul tries to get David to adopt conventional arms and armor, the young believer briefly humors the old king, but then makes it clear what a silly idea this would be: fighting Goliath on his own terms would lead to certain defeat. David's famous unconventional strategy arouses his opponent's scorn, right up to the moment when David destroys him.

Although generations of believers have taken heart in knowing that it is possible for a 'David' to beat a 'Goliath', very few grasp the real point of the episode (indeed, none of the other Israelites do here - 17:55-58). If we want to battle giant opponents, we cannot go about it by worldly means. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Time and again, churches resort to worldly methods, relying on pre-packaged programs, motivational talks, and the like. Time and again, individual believers address their problems in worldly fashion, relying on human experts, money, or fleshly talent. These things either fail, or worse, they lead to worldly kinds of success that pull us away from God.

David shunned the obvious methods of the world, entrusted all to God, and experienced the fruits of faithfulness. God does not want us to try to be cleverer or stronger or wealthier than the world, so that we can conquer the world. He wants us to rise above the world and its fears, through our faith and his grace.

BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Thirteen: False Praise, Comparisons, & Jealousy (1 Samuel 18:1-30)

After defeating the fearsome Goliath, David quickly becomes famous throughout Israel. With the Philistines humbled, Israel's joy and relief overflows, but it is not long before new problems arise. This time, the danger comes from within, starting with King Saul's jealousy of David's sudden popularity. It does not help matters any that Israel honors David for the wrong reasons.

In the relief and excitement following the defeat of Goliath and the Philistines, there is a short period of universal good feeling (18:1-5). King Saul generously rewards David, Saul's impulsive but good-hearted son Jonathan becomes devoted to the new hero, and the nation rejoices in David's successes.

But trouble soon starts, when the Israelites' undue praises of David's accomplishments arouse a bitter jealousy in Saul (18:6-9). The king's jealousy will eventually plunge the nation into division and violence. Indeed, the story of Saul's crazed hatred is well-known to readers of the Old Testament. But it bears noting that the problem actually begins with Israel itself - and it is a problem that today's believers often deny or ignore, because it hits at the root of some of our own spiritual illnesses.

The people's praises are not for God, who supplied them with the man to defeat Goliath, nor even for David's faith, which enabled him to overcome the giant. Rather, they praise David for his human accomplishments, and for doing things that have benefitted them personally. They are also making comparisons between their leaders, evaluating them to see which one has done more for them. Although they are excited now, the falseness and error of their praise will soon be demonstrated emphatically. During the long, sad struggle that will soon divide Israel, most of the Israelites will invariably act in a selfish, opportunistic fashion.

Saul's jealousy quickly leads to violence (18:10-16). As David's successes continue, Saul becomes increasingly insecure, and he tries for the first time to kill David. For his part, David does no wrong yet, and his popularity remains high. When Saul cools off, he tries a more subtle means of destroying David (18:17-30). He offers in marriage first his older daughter, then his younger daughter, in exchange for David risking his life by going again into battle.

All of Saul's efforts to undermine David merely make his young servant stronger, while Saul's self-centered fear increases. The nation as a whole, though, seems oblivious to the growing problem. The people still see David as a made-to-order savior, whom they value only for what they gain from his victories, not for his faith or other spiritual qualities. Saul, whom they revered only a short while ago, has become an afterthought.

This fickleness of human opinion is only a symptom of a deeper spiritual disease. Nor should we feel superior. How often does our society think it has learned an important 'lesson', only to forget it as soon as danger has passed? How often do we turn public figures into one-dimensional heroes or villains, based on what they do for us or how they make us feel? How often do we, like Saul, get our security from fleshly achievements, and inevitably feel insecure and jealous when someone outdoes us? Let us learn what we can, even from bad examples.

BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Fourteen: Conflicting Loyalties (1 Samuel 19:1-20:42)

Israel's intemperate praise of David's military achievements have provoked Saul to bitter envy, which will never be cured for the rest of the king's sad life. The Israelites' own spiritual weaknesses make things even worse, bringing them into a lengthy series of events in which they will attack each other with the zeal they once showed against their enemies. Whenever believers get tangled up in worldly attitudes and rivalries, spiritual trouble soon follows.

Saul's son Jonathan does succeed in patching things up temporarily (19:1-8). He reasons with his father, showing him that there is no cause to be resentful or jealous towards someone as loyal as David. Many such situations can indeed be resolved favorably through this same combination of forthrightness and compassion. It is not Jonathan's fault that trouble soon starts again.

The next time that Saul's envy flares into violence, it is his daughter Michal - now married to David - who protects David from the king's murderous rage (19:9-24). Like her brother, Michal is torn between her loyalty to her father (plus her fear of him) and her love of David. Here, when David is caught by surprise, she deliberately deceives her father in order to give David time to escape. Later on, though, she will turn against David. Her father's sins will aggravate the negative effects of her own comparatively smaller faults.

Then it is again Jonathan's turn to stand between Saul and David (20:1-42). Poor Jonathan first must endure an excruciating conversation with his father, and then must go through an elaborate charade to warn his friend of Saul's intentions. Afraid to oppose his father openly, and unwilling to betray a valued friend, Jonathan is never able to come down firmly on either side.

These tumultuous and sometimes sordid events are a powerful illustration of the fruits of fleshly ambition, rivalry, and jealousy. Saul is a somber warning to us whenever we begin to feel a sense of competition with others. "When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12). The urge to compete and compare is instilled in each of us by the world, and it may take many forms. The world considers it necessary and even healthy, but in Jesus we must instead help one another selflessly.

Saul's example also demonstrates how envy and jealousy affect others even when they have no direct involvement. Saul's family suffers heavily from his bitterness and rage, and later on even more persons will be harmed. In his own mind, Saul thought his anger was justified - but even if David had in fact harmed the king, it would not have warranted the ways that Saul's vengeful actions hurt others. We should remember this, for our own negative feelings towards others can also blind us to the ways that our attitudes can harm innocent bystanders.

Finally, remember how all of this started. Saul's troubles began when he got so caught up in his own position that he casually disregarded some things God had told him. He never expected to come to his present state. We too should maintain a constant reverence and respect for everything about God, so that he will guard our souls and will protect us from fates like Saul's.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009*

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BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Fifteen: Worse & Worse (1 Samuel 21:1-22:23)

Ever since the people demanded a strong king "such as the other nations have" - a mistake that itself was the result of other spiritual weaknesses - the tension has grown, as the Israelites' fleshly expectations and Saul's personal desires conflict with God's will, and with their own spiritual needs. Now, division and violence can no longer be avoided.

Realizing that Saul's jealousy is unquenchable, David decides to flee (21:1-9). The only place he can find trustworthy help is from the priest Ahimelech. Despite fearing for his own life, Ahimelech faithfully assists the runaway. He even allows David to eat the consecrated bread, an act of compassion that Jesus mentions in the gospels as an example of God's preference for mercy over ritual obedience. God will take care of the faithful fugitive, for God has already anointed him as Israel's true and future king.

In desperation, David even seeks refuge among the Philistines (21:10-22:1a). Though we can understand his anxiety about remaining in Israel, it still seems inappropriate for David to trust in these brutes instead of seeking godlier sources of help. It is noticeable that, unlike at most other times of need, David does not ask God what to do (chapter 22 contrasts sharply with chapter 23). Yet who of us has not acted the same, in moments of anguish or fear? In any case, God in his grace allows David to see that he is in danger, and by a ruse David leaves Philistia safely.

Events now get stranger (22:1b-5). Arousing sympathy in the lowest and least stable elements of society, David becomes the leader of a large group of assorted malcontents. He finds his parents a home in Moab, another pagan nation filled with idols, thinking it safer for them there than in Israel. God finally sends a prophet to remind David that he belongs in Judah. It's difficult to know what God thought of all of David's decisions, for it is clear that David is having trouble thinking clearly. We do know that God has made promises to David, and he will keep them.

Sadly, David's fears for his family and friends are well-founded (22:6-23). A sycophantic informer named Doeg tells Saul about the help that the priest gave to David. Saul confronts Ahimelech, and orders the deaths of him and everyone in his family. When Saul's own guards refuse to carry out this barbaric request, the toady Doeg is happy to oblige. Only one of the priest's sons escapes, and he joins David. For his part, David is distressed not only by his own peril, but even more so by the way that those close to him are suffering.

This is one of the sadder periods in Israel's history. It is the result of many mistakes: the foolish desire for a king, Saul's spiritual weakness, the mistakes made long ago by Eli and by Samuel's sons, the worldly adulation of David (and Saul) for the wrong reasons. But there is good news, for God still reigns, still cares about his people, and fully intends to keep his promises. Sometimes we too have nothing except God to hope in. Both David and Israel would get through these problems, and we too can know that God is with us even in the worst of times.

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BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Sixteen: Grace In The Midst Of Peril (1 Samuel 23:1-24:22)

Saul's envious anger towards David, inflamed by the people's worldly praises and by Saul's other spiritual flaws, has now flared up uncontrollably. He has David on the run, and Saul will not hesitate to inflict violence and injustice on anyone who protects his intended victim. For his part, David is struggling to think clearly (who wouldn't be), yet we shall now see the side of David that led God to call him "a man after my own heart".

David's willingness to help the besieged town of Keilah shows that even in distress he could keep the right priorities (23:1-6). When he hears that bullies from Philistia are looting the helpless settlement, his immediate desire is to go to their aid. Yet his concern for the helpless is combined with the desire to do God's will. As simple as it may seem, David's decision to pray before committing himself may be even more praiseworthy than his eagerness to help.

It may seem a simple thing, yet it was precisely Saul's casual disregard for God's will that sent him spiraling downwards spiritually. Over the course of his life, David probably made about as many mistakes as Saul did, and some of them caused serious harm. But David's sins came in moments of weakness and folly, not times of willful, clear-minded disregard for God's wishes.

Unfortunately, David's act of mercy tips off Saul as to where he can find his imagined rival (23:7-14). David again faithfully seeks God's guidance, and so God warns him that the ungrateful citizens of Keilah are planning to turn him over to Saul, in order to protect themselves. David also receives help and encouragement again from Jonathan (23:15-18).

Early in his life as an exile (in chapter 22), we did not see David asking God what to do, and as a result he sought help in some odd places. But now that he has gotten back into the habit of consulting God at all times, we can see the effects. This does not mean his problems are over - in fact, once more Saul learns of his whereabouts from a group eager to win favor with the powerful but ungodly king (23:19-25). But this time, God provides a distraction to protect David, without David needing to do anything (23:26-29). The closer David is to God, the easier it is for God to take care of him without leaving those close to David exposed to harm.

David's renewed closeness with God also shows in his actions towards Saul (24:1-22). He has never harbored any hatred or malice towards the hateful king, and now he is an even brighter example of a godly attitude. In his blind rage, Saul is even more careless and impulsive than usual; and his negligence provides David an easy opportunity to kill Saul and end the threat.

How easy it would have been for David to rationalize the killing of Saul. His own loyal men urge him to do so, seeing the opportunity as a blessing from God. But David is too gracious even to consider such an action. Indeed, when he snips off a corner of Saul's robe as a caution to the deranged king, David regrets even that. Many years later, David's descendant Jesus would show the same gracious compassion towards his persecutors. Their attitudes are a challenging example to us, and they are also a shining reminder of God's own extraordinary depths of grace.

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BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Seventeen: The Adventures Of David In Exile (1 Samuel 25:1-27:12)

Faced with Saul's anger and hatred, it took David a while to restore his own spiritual calm and closeness with God. For a time, David sought help in some inappropriate places. But soon he resumed faithfully praying to God about everything; God kept him safe without so much risk to others, while David's treatment of Saul shows the heart that pleased God so much.

As David's period of exile and peril drags on, he begins to experience further spiritual ups and downs. His odd interactions with Nabal and Abigail show the different sides of David's internal conflict (25:1-44). Without question, Nabal is an ignorant oaf, but his loutish behavior simply does not justify David's violent response to what was really no more than an insult.

Only careful intervention by the sensitive Abigail prevents David from doing something he would regret. David does have the good sense to realize the truth of Abigail's calming words, and his anger subsides. Yet we also see another ominous development, as David adds her to a growing collection of wives. He seems to view even such a wise woman as Abigail as just one more source of comfort and pleasure for himself. Later on, David's possessive attitude towards women will have destructive consequences.

In contrast with this rather questionable behavior, David once again shines in his next encounter with Saul (26:1-25). The king's envy and rage have flared up again, and in his blind pursuit of David, he again has let down his guard. His army commander, the usually skilful Abner, doesn't realize Saul's vulnerable position (Abner himself seems confused and demoralized by the king's weird behavior). Yet David again passes up a perfect chance to kill Saul without risk to himself. He appeals to Saul to accept him as a friend, and even reproves Abner for his carelessness. Thus David again shows us an example of God's grace at work, a challenging example to follow.

Yet the strain on David shows once more in his strange, deceitful relations with the Philistines (27:1-12). After trusting in God to withstand Saul's attacks, and even showing mercy to Saul, David again wavers. He probably was safer for a while with the Philistines, but by staying there he was led into a pattern of deceit and violence, living by killing and raiding while lying to the Philistine rulers about his activities. Likewise, we at times might find that it feels safer to adopt the world's ways for a while, yet this apparent safety for the flesh comes with risks to the soul.

It is important to note both the mistakes David is making and also the ways he remains faithful, so that we can learn from his experiences. In fact, he is much more like us than we usually realize. His mistakes come from understandable fears or provocation, while his victories (of all forms) are the result of faith allowing him to rise above fleshly nature and desires. David was not a heroic super-believer, for such things do not exist. He was a soul just like us, whose mistakes and acts of faith can both help us to understand God's will more fully.

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BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART: THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

Week Eighteen: Strange Days Indeed (1 Samuel 28:1-30:31)

As Israel's lengthy period of turmoil and confusion continues, matters come to a head when the Philistines decide to attack Israel again. With Saul deteriorating steadily, and David himself driven to desperation by Saul's relentless hounding, it is no surprise that some odd, confusing, and even demoralizing events take place. The Scripture records them faithfully and truthfully, so that we will have no illusions about living in this world.

The new attack is led by Achish, the Philistine prince with whom David has taken refuge (28:1-2). David's promise to serve Achish loyally in battle means either that he was ready to fight and kill his brothers in Israel in service to a pagan ruler, or else that he planned to deceive the Philistines as soon as he had the opportunity. Either way, this shows us how desperation can drive even the most faithful persons into trouble the moment they lose sight of God's protection.

The same imminent attack moves Saul to even more bizarre actions (28:3-25). His consultation with a 'medium' - an activity he himself had banned - arouses our curiosity, amongst other things. Since the incident is presented factually (and since any fraud by the 'medium' would certainly have been designed to please Saul, not to upset him), there is no conclusive reason why the king couldn't have heard from the now-dead Samuel. The Scriptures never tell us that such things don't happen - they only tell us that believers should never be involved with them.

Meanwhile, the Philistines decide that they don't want David with them in battle, after all (29:1-11). Although David has won Achish's confidence by a combination of bravery, friendship, and deceit, the other Philistines are uncomfortable with the idea of Goliath's killer fighting on their side against his own people. While we do not know whether this was God's way of delivering David from a difficult choice, this definitely does provide him with a way out.

So, while Israel and the Philistines engage in a decisive battle, David and his men are involved in adventures of a purely private nature (30:1-31). His battles with the Amalekites, along with his distribution of the spoils, display David's courage, generosity, and military skill; yet they also show him concentrating ruthlessly on matters at hand, regardless of what happens to others.

Although most of us may not ever be involved in events on this kind of scale, the same kind of up-and-down activity is what life in this world is like, even for believers. We shall all stumble from time to time, and we shall see other believers make strange and unwise decisions. We shall live through times of trial: as individuals, as a congregation, and as members of earthly nations. We can never say that nobody told us there would be days like these, because God has.

Jesus himself, when he told his disciples about the trials ahead, said, "I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you" (John 16:4). Life in this world is not ever going to be perfect, and it was not meant to be so. If we learn to view the things of this life from the right perspective, they can instead help us to grow in our love for the eternal Father and in our eager anticipation of our future home with him.

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**BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART:
THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL**

Week Nineteen: The End Of An Era (1 Samuel 31:1-13)

When Saul became king, the people of Israel thought that their dreams had come true. No longer were they different from the other nations, for now they had their own big, strong king to lead them in war and in peace. But their fleshly expectations combined with Saul's spiritual flaws to produce a lengthy and painful period of division, violence, and disorder. Saul's impending death will end an era of transition and confusion, yet his baleful influence will persist in years to come.

Instead of another glorious victory over the Philistines, the battle on Mount Gilboa was a crushing loss for Saul and for Israel (31:1-6). With his army routed and three of his own sons killed in battle, Saul kills himself to avoid capture and humiliation. Saul's spiritual and character flaws were exposed and badly aggravated by the power and privilege that came with being king, and this shameful end is the predictable result.

The Israelites' selfish desire for a king destroyed Saul, and Saul's callous disregard for God caused death and destruction for many Israelites. Yet, human nature being what it is, very few of them will realize their errors. One era has ended, and with it some unhappy events. Another era will begin, with new victories but also new problems. David was much better than Saul in the ways that mattered most to God, but power and authority would eventually corrupt him too, and his reign too would include some sad episodes.

For now, the Israelites taste the bitter fruit of their fleshly reliance on a human ruler (31:7). They panic, and make their defeat even worse, abandoning large portions of fertile territory to the victorious Philistines. The Philistines, for their part, show by their barbarous behavior that their victory had nothing to do with their own goodness or merit (31:8-10). This brutish nation enjoyed many triumphs over the Israelites, but only because they were available for God to use as a source of discipline.

For centuries, the Philistines lived side-by-side with a people who worshiped the only living God; yet they rarely showed the slightest interest in seeking the true God. Whose fault is this? As with most such sorrowful things, there is plenty of blame to spread around.

The one small positive note in this whole dreary sequence of events comes from the town of Jabesh Gilead (31:11-13). Years ago, in happier times for Saul and for Israel, King Saul had once rescued this helpless settlement from the Ammonites (see chapter 11). Now, at considerable risk to themselves, they retrieve Saul's remains from the Philistines, and dispose of them respectfully. With nothing to gain for themselves, they provide a glimmer of light and grace at a time when almost everyone else is desperately seeking their own interests.

The reign of Saul was a transition era for Israel, and for today's believers it is full of lessons. It defies easy characterization, for at times there is simply no one doing the right thing. It thwarts our desire to summarize its events with comforting platitudes, for the innocent often suffer with the guilty. One thing we can say without doubt is that God reigned then just as he does now. No matter how inconstant his people are, he is always the same wise, righteous, gracious God.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week One: David, Saul, & Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:1-27)

With Saul's death, things change significantly for David and for the nation of Israel. David is the anointed king, and yet there will still be a series of conflicts before his reign is firmly established. To some degree, the turmoil ahead is foreshadowed by David's mixed response to the news of Saul's death. As has been the case during many of his recent experiences, he shows a combination of godly graciousness and fleshly weakness.

Since David was involved in personal activities while Israel's army fell to the Philistines on Mount Gilboa, he hears of Saul's death from a messenger (1:1-15). This foolish messenger decides to embellish his story (compare the messenger's story with the account given in 1 Samuel 31:4-6), thinking that David would reward him for being the one who had ended Saul's life. But he is taken by surprise by David's violent, capricious response.

Was David right to kill this man? There is no definite answer, and there wouldn't be one even if the man's story were true. In one sense, David is right to be disturbed about those who would strike the Lord's anointed, but in another sense, since David is now the anointed, his action is in part self-serving. David's loyalty to the memory of Saul is admirable, but killing this messenger is not going to help Saul now. This is just one more strange event in a troublesome time.

On the other hand, David's song of lament for Saul and Jonathan shows a better, more compassionate side of David (1:17-27). He is able to remember Saul as he once was, or perhaps even as he could have been. And his appreciation for Jonathan's self-sacrificing friendship is so striking that David's words about Jonathan are sometimes quoted even in non-religious contexts.

Throughout his coming reign as king, David will swing back-and-forth between faithfulness and sinfulness. Although his reign was often remembered as a golden era by the Israelites in later years, in actuality much of it was a time of continuing turmoil and uncertainty, with only brief periods of peace. David is no hero, and the story of 2 Samuel is not about a great godly ruler. Rather, it is the story of a wise and gracious God who kept a foolish nation and its believing but sinful king in his care, because of God's own compassion and grace.

David was a sinful, foolish person, just as Saul had been. The significant difference is that David's faith and awareness of God gave him a different perspective. He did not grab credit for his victories, because he knew that they had come from God. And he did not make excuses for his sins, but remorsefully confessed them and repented. This allowed God to bless and protect David, in spite of David's grievous character flaws.

David knew this to be true. Near the end of his life, he looked back and sang about the glory and greatness of God, who had brought him safely through so many problems (2 Samuel 22; see also Psalm 18). He celebrated God as his Savior, his deliverer and fortress. David did not exalt himself, but sang, "Exalted be God, the Rock" (22:47), because only God is constant in his compassion, grace, and wisdom. David was no rock, and neither are we. But we have a Rock in God, and he will always be there for his children today, just as he was always there for David.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009*

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Two: Civil War In Israel (2 Samuel 2:1-4:12)

With Saul's death, David was the only anointed king of Israel – but not everyone accepted this. Although most of Saul's family had died with him, Saul's remaining descendants were still seen as the royal house by many of the Israelites. Thus, the period following Saul's death was a bloody time of battle, hatred, and murder. In later years, the Israelites would view David's reign as something of a golden era, but this is just the natural human tendency towards flesh-pleasing over-simplifications. In reality, if God had not time and again blessed the people in spite of all their sins, then David's reign would have been a complete disaster.

Whenever David takes the time to seek God's guidance, he does the right things (2:1-7). He knows that he is God's anointed king, and so instead of acting impulsively he allows God to guide him to Hebron, where he is established as king over Judah. His first act as recognized king is to send a message of goodwill to Jabesh Gilead, recognizing the selfless way that they had recovered Saul's remains from the Philistines. The narrator of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel has made prominent mention of the times David has gone out of his way to consult God, so that we can compare the results with those on the occasions when he did not.

Outside of Judah, Saul's son Ish-Bosheth is considered as the rightful king (2:8-11). Supported by the respected army commander Abner, Ish-Bosheth will reign for several years, while David must wait to extend his kingdom beyond the confines of his own tribe's territory. For it is human nature to disagree about who should be in authority, and humans have always preferred to trust in their own silly forms of government rather than putting their complete faith in God.

The division leads to violent confrontation (2:12-32). Each king's supporters were convinced that they were entirely in the right, and thus that the situation justified whatever actions they might desire to take. These first battles settle nothing, and lead only to bloodshed. They also provide the basis for future sorrows, when the rash behavior of the foolish showoff Asahel provokes Abner reluctantly to kill him.

Later, as David's forces gradually wear down the opposition, the perceptive Abner realizes that he will be on the losing side, so he picks a fight with Ish-Bosheth and uses it as a pretext for changing sides (3:1-21). David imposes some unnecessary conditions, but is glad to have Abner's support, since it means that the outcome of the conflict is no longer in doubt.

The civil war has essentially been decided, but more bloodshed is still to come (3:22-4:12). David's cousin Joab, one of the army commanders, murders Abner in retaliation for the death of Joab's impetuous brother Asahel. The violent, brainless Joab is a symptom of what later will seriously damage David's kingship. David condemns and weeps over what Joab has done, but he takes absolutely no steps to restrain this volatile subordinate. He is more forceful in dealing with the brutes who murdered Ish-Bosheth, but perhaps only because he had no need for them.

The heavily mixed nature of David's reign is far from the stereotyped view of it that believers often have, but it is in truth more helpful to us for that reason. David was much more like us than we usually realize, and his chaotic era was enough like ours that we can learn a lot from it.

EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Three: David Is Established As King (2 Samuel 5:1-25)

After a period of violent conflict between the tribes of Israel, David has emerged in a position of strength. There is no longer any significant opposition to him as king. More importantly, God renews his promises to David and adds some new ones. Israel's past was full of painful and harmful events, and their future is uncertain. The present is neither good nor bad, but if nothing else, it holds opportunity.

The defection of Abner and the death of Ish-Bosheth leave David as the obvious choice to reign over all Israel (5:1-5). It is worth noting that God's promise to David was fulfilled only after years full of waiting and tumult. David is not the only such example: Joseph, Moses, and many other figures of faith often had to undergo long waits before they received the things God had in mind to give them. These encouraging examples remind us to concentrate not on the timing of God's promises, but on their certainty.

One of David's legendary feats was the conquest of Jerusalem (5:6-10). The Jebusites had held this fortified city for many years, standing in the midst of Israel and defying all efforts to take it. Despite their strong position, their history, and their worldly confidence, David took the city and made it his capital, modestly re-naming it the City Of David (a name that still applies to the oldest part of the city). This impressive victory led rulers such as the king of Tyre to congratulate David and to seek his favor (5:11-12).

But there are ominous developments, too, as David continues to amass wives and concubines to fulfill his desires (5:13-16). Although it is common for believers to seek some rationalization or defense for David's treatment of women, in reality there is no acceptable reason for it. His refusal to curb his sensual desires, and his possessive attitudes towards women, would eventually destroy or damage many more lives. If he had developed some self-control and some purity, he could have avoided a lot of pain.

But for now, he and the people bask in a series of victories, adding another rout of the Philistines to David's list of triumphs (5:17-25). Here is another example of David's strengths, for when the Philistines attack, he seeks God's guidance more than once, in order to make sure that he is doing things as God wills it. This willingness to submit to God's will is much more important than David's fighting skill; it is only unfortunate that he did not take the same approach in all other areas of his life.

For David and for Israel, the good times have started, ending a period of suffering and confusion. And the good times will keep going for a little while. But, as humans in every era tend to do, instead of using this opportunity to address some problems that could cause trouble in the future, they just want to enjoy what they have. Real trouble won't come right away, but when it does, it will be all the more unfortunate because of the missed opportunities. One of the lessons we learn in 2 Samuel is that only God is perfect enough never to need to change. We should always be ready to learn and grow, both in good times and in bad times.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Four: David's Love For God (2 Samuel 6:1-7:29)

Recognized at last as the sole king of Israel, David has defeated the Jebusites and Philistines in battle, and he now turns to more peaceful pursuits. David's love for God and his desire to praise God are worthy of careful study and meditation – not in order to imitate his outward actions, but to realize what it was that God appreciated about David.

With the land at peace, David decides that it is time to bring the Ark of God back to Jerusalem (6:1-5). The ark was above all a symbol of God's presence, and thus it is proper for the decision to be accompanied by celebration. This is the kind of thing that David understands, whereas Saul was always oblivious to anything that he could not see or touch.

Yet it would have been better for the Israelites to combine their joy with caution (6:6-7). When the ark slips, due to not being carried properly, one man touches it and is immediately struck dead. Even our good intentions (by human standards) do not allow us to forget God's awe-inspiring majesty and transcendence. Everything about him must always be treated with respect.

David overreacts, abandoning his plan altogether; but when the memory of this sobering incident has receded in his mind, David resumes his original plan to bring the ark to Jerusalem (6:8-23). Once again, the occasion is not one of unmixed celebration, for Michal, the first of his numerous wives, is unhappy with his behavior in front of the servant girls.

David's eagerness to praise God now leads him to formulate a new plan (7:1-2). Although his dream of building a temple involved some things that he did not understand very well, this is again an indication of what mattered to David. For all his flaws, he did love and appreciate God, and he wanted to do something for God whenever he had the occasion to do so.

Through the prophet Nathan, God explains that he wants the temple to be built only after David's lifetime (7:3-17). David responds to this news with a humble prayer of thanks and praise, which comes from the precious faith deep inside him (7:18-29). It can be very hard to give up a dream, especially one that seemed to have good motivations behind it. But David genuinely does put God's will ahead of his own. If God wants his son to build the temple instead of him, so be it.

David's love for God made him 'a man after God's own heart' despite the immorality and violence in David's earthly life. David is not a flawless storybook hero; he is a sinful man who would have been condemned if God had not poured out his grace upon him. In return, God did not ask for perfect behavior or knowledge - for David was incapable of either - but only love.

What we should learn from David is not any specific action, for he did as many things wrong as he did right. There is a more important lesson here, one that pleases the soul and not the flesh. David's humble appreciation of what God had done, and his willingness to please God in any possible way, were far more important to God than anything David actually did. Once we realize this and accept it, it tells us a lot about what God wants from us, too.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Five: David At His Peak (2 Samuel 8:1-11:1)

After years of waiting, David has become the sole king of Israel. He has also restored the ark of God to Jerusalem, which was both a symbolic victory and a practical victory. Now, for a little while, he is able for the first time to hold unquestioned authority in Israel, and the nation enjoys a series of victories. Times like this don't come very often, and when they do, we have a tendency just to try to enjoy them as long as possible. Yet it is better and wiser to look for the opportunities they offer.

For the time being, David is the master of the region, and he proves it by defeating the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans, and several other rivals (8:1-18). Unlike Saul, he is careful to devote to God whatever share of the spoils God asks for, and thus his string of victories continues, instead of being cut short as Saul's career was.

Yet David also has a bad habit of looking for ways to terrorize or humiliate defeated foes, and he also continues to keep his bloodthirsty cousin Joab in a position of power. God does not punish him directly for these errors, for that is not how God works. But David's unwillingness to deal with these things now, when he had the perfect chance to do so, will cause a lot of trouble later.

Still, David always has some fine things in his heart, as his treatment of Jonathan's son Mephibosheth demonstrates (9:1-13). Notice that this request was not brought to David's attention by someone else – rather, this is another instance of David thinking on his own about what he might be able to do to please God or to help someone else. When he finds out about Jonathan's disabled son, David shows him lavish hospitality and generosity.

David even tries to show kindness towards the Ammonites, but his gesture of goodwill is brutally rebuffed (10:1-6). The barbarous Ammonites abuse and insult David's emissaries, and they then use the occasion to launch an unprovoked attack on Israel. They ally in this venture with the Arameans, who themselves eagerly seize the chance to go to war.

The Ammonites, who had instigated the conflict, quickly find themselves out of their depth, and so they flee, leaving their Aramean allies to experience a crushing defeat (10:7-19). David takes the time to understand the situation, for he allows the Arameans to make a peace arrangement with Israel, while sending Joab with the army to destroy the rest of the Ammonite forces (11:1).

In all of these activities, David retains both God's favor and the people's support. Though his actions are imperfect, his faith in God often leads him to do positive things without being asked. If his reign had continued in this fashion, then it may really have become the kind of golden age that later generations (erroneously) remembered it to be. In truth, though, David's string of victories and his enduring popularity have made him spiritually complacent, for instead of addressing some persistent problems, he is about to make a serious - and very sinful - mistake.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Six: Just A Matter Of Time (2 Samuel 11:2-12:31)

The good times in Israel have now gone on for a while, but this has led the people and their king into complacency. David's long-standing weaknesses and sinful attitudes towards women, combined with the toxic political power he holds, now give rise to a series of events that eventually will undo almost everything good about David's reign. As always, the Scriptures faithfully record the truth about humans, because no human being, not even David or Paul, should ever be our hero. Those men needed God's grace every bit as much as you and I need it.

Looking at the sequence of events that starts with David's lustful desire for Bathsheba, it would be hard even to list all of the inexcusable sins involved (11:1-27). Adultery, abuse of power, conspiracy, and murder by proxy are only the more obvious offenses. There really is little point in detailing just how horrible David's behavior here is – the real question is to consider how such a faithful person could, completely without provocation, commit such monstrously ugly actions.

In part, the same thing has happened to David that happened to Saul. Human power and authority are always spiritually harmful to those who seek or hold them, because the wielding of power over one's fellow beings - regardless of the pretext or rationalization - is inherently a usurpation of God's proper role. God himself wisely had never desired for his people to have an earthly king.

Israel could not have asked for a king with more faith than David had, and yet we can see how many wrong things David has done. Let this be a warning to believers today, whenever they foolishly dream of having 'Christian' political rulers who would impose their ways on others.

But there is more than this at work. David's sinfully relentless pursuit of Bathsheba is just the inevitable consequence of his lifelong unwillingness to restrain his sensual desires and his possessive attitudes towards women. Similar weaknesses can occur even amongst the faithful, and when they are accompanied by rationalizations and pride, they can cause severe harm. David is a warning to those who would ignore this lesson. Both he and many others will have to pay a high price for his unnecessary sensual indulgences.

Despite David's attempts to cover up what he had done, the faithful prophet Nathan brings everything out into the open (12:1-14). Nathan's famous parable is strikingly effective in inducing David to convict himself. For it is noteworthy how easily we condemn our sin when we see it in others, yet continue to rationalize it in ourselves. David's quick acceptance of his wrong, when it is finally exposed, is the one thing that he does right – and this, rather than his outward behavior, is the crucial difference between David and Saul.

With his grievous sins publicly exposed, David displays great sorrow and remorse (12:15-31). Although he clings to the desperate hope that (contrary to God's stated will) the child of his adulterous liaison will somehow live, his repentance is sincere. We can read also his memorable words of penitence in Psalm 51, which David wrote at this time. David had gone too far to undo his sin, but he could learn from it, and he accepted the fact that only God's mercy and grace, not any dramatic acts of atonement, could keep his soul from immediate spiritual death.

EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Seven: Like Father, Like Sons (2 Samuel 13:1-14:33)

Despite David's weaknesses, most of the Israelites had held him in high esteem until the prophet Nathan revealed that the king was guilty of adultery, and then of murder, in an attempt to cover up his lust. Now things can never be the same. God has forgiven David, but the idealized image of the king that the people once had can no longer be restored. Indeed, the worst trouble now starts from within David's own family.

When Amnon, one of David's many sons, uses deception to force himself upon his half-sister Tamar (13:1-22), we can see a painful parallel with David's own behavior. There is no excuse for Amnon, who is fully responsible for his own actions; but that does not excuse David for the poor example he consistently set for his own family. Amnon has seen his own father seize any woman who pleased him, and he has adopted the same habit. David is infuriated by these events, but he neither says nor does anything either to discipline Amnon or to make things better.

Things soon get even worse, because Amnon's offenses have angered Tamar's full brother Absalom (13:23-39). Absalom's concern for Tamar may be sincere, but with this positive emotion he also harbors some sinful attitudes. When Absalom coldly plans and carries out the murder of his half-brother, he too is following the example of David and of Joab, in dealing with his problems through violence. In one sequence of events, David's family is torn apart.

Absalom then flees as a fugitive, and not until three years later is he able to return to Jerusalem (14:1-27). Joab, for once acting with some degree of sincerity, facilitates a change of heart in David, knowing that David truly loves Absalom and misses him. Some of Joab's methods are odd, but they obtain results, and we should probably give Joab some credit this time. Even the most violent and objectionable of persons can have some good things in his heart.

The next step in Absalom's return is to see his father for the first time since his exile (14:28-33). In a foreshadowing of coming deceptions, Absalom destroys one of Joab's fields as a weird way of persuading Joab to help him again. There is some morbid humor in the confrontation between these two violent deceivers, yet it does end with a reunion between David and his son.

We do not know how these events were perceived by those who witnessed them. We know only that Absalom will soon bring even more harm and sorrow to David than he has already caused. David seems oddly absent from the flow of events, allowing others to spark him to action and to advise him what to do. David, his family, and the nation of Israel are all paying the price for the many times that David has missed opportunities to deal with his problems.

No one is ever immune to sin, and no one is ever exempt from the sufferings it can cause. The misfortunes of David's family were not direct punishments from God; they were simply the natural consequences of sin. They remind us how dangerous it can be to become spiritually complacent, and yet they also show us the extraordinary grace of God, who continues to love and care for his children, even after their most appalling mistakes.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009*

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Eight: Deception, Conspiracy, & Humiliation (2 Samuel 15:1-16:14)

For a time, David had enjoyed unchallenged authority and unrivalled popularity in Israel. But his own sins – lust, deceit, abuse of power, neglect of his family – have brought him to a precarious point. Manipulated by the likes of Joab and Absalom, distant from the people, and unwilling to make tough decisions, David is on the verge of some real problems. Once again, a member of his own family strikes the heaviest blow to the king.

David's son Absalom, back in favor after a period of exile for murdering his brother, takes advantage of his father's naive generosity and plots to seize the kingdom for himself (15:1-12). His methods are simple but effective, making use of the people's dissatisfaction with David while exploiting their natural human gullibility at the same time. There are persons like Absalom in every era, sometimes appealing to our selfish interests, sometimes appealing to our fears and paranoia, sometimes promising to make our religious beliefs the law of the land.

David is blindsided by the news of Absalom's sudden and successful uprising, and he immediately takes flight in fear of his life (15:13-37). It is sad to see such a renowned king reduced to such desperation, and even sadder that his own son had caused such distress. Yet we must learn about this stage of David's life if we are to understand who he was and why he matters to believers in Jesus. The Scriptures faithfully record not only his victories and acts of faith, but also his disasters and his sins.

Besides having his own son rise up against him, David also faces deceivers and abusers eager to take advantage of the situation (16:1-14). First, Mephibosheth's servant Ziba deceives David by claiming that Mephibosheth has also turned against the king. Beaten down by events and probably in a hurry to escape harm, David gives Mephibosheth's inheritance to the deceptive Ziba. Then a man named Shimei, a relative of Saul, harasses and assaults the fleeing David.

But David shows that even in such despair he remains conscious of God. He acts towards Ziba as he thinks he should, and he refuses to harm or punish Shimei. He even acknowledges the truth of Shimei's insults, for David is humble enough to realize that he has caused some of his own problems. Even when Shimei throws stones at David, the king accepts it as discipline, and does not seek revenge.

The cold realities of David's reign show how mistaken it is to regard his era as some kind of golden age. Yet there is a positive lesson as well. Throughout his life, David has always been at his best in times of trial. When others were endangered, he was usually the first to help. When he was persecuted, he usually forgave. When he was in distress, he humbled himself, depending on God and not complaining about his hardships. This is the David whom we should emulate, at least in these respects.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Nine: Absalom, Absalom (2 Samuel 16:15-18:18)

The chaos, violence, and deception during the time of Absalom's rebellion recall some of the worst times during Saul's tortuous reign. There is plenty of blame to go around, and at times Israel offers nothing even remotely resembling a good example. Yet, as with all such situations, there are lessons that we can learn from even the most disturbing of events.

David was often at his best when times were the worst, and here again he is thinking clearly when he sends his friend Hushai to slow down Absalom by giving him bad advice (16:15-17:14). David knew his adversary, and he knew the odds against himself, so he wisely chooses this subtle tactic rather than a head-on confrontation. Hushai exploits Absalom's vanity to persuade the rebel not to follow the good counsel of his own adviser Ahithophel. We can learn from this too, because too much of the time we try to fight the world with its own aggression, which usually gains nothing and only drags us down to the level of the worldly.

A number of interesting things happen in the aftermath of Hushai's meeting with Absalom (17:15-29). Hushai's report is passed along to David through a series of messengers, in order not to expose any one person to extra risk. The relay system works, and we can see that David and/or his followers had carefully worked out a system to bring David and his men the information and the supplies they needed.

Then there is the behavior of the clever but self-important Ahithophel. When he realizes that his advice has been rejected, he falls into such despair that he kills himself. Ahithophel's problem was that he was more concerned with the response to his advice than he was with whether his guidance was truthful and accurate in itself. His advice was perfectly good, but he was not secure enough in what he knew to see that Absalom hurt only himself by ignoring his it.

Although Absalom is now supremely confident, and all outward appearances seem to favor him, in actuality he is doomed (18:1-18). He had the numbers, but David had the organization. Absalom had the support of those who seemed important, but David's followers were more loyal and determined. The victory for David's forces comes almost too easily, and Absalom is surrounded, separated from his supporters.

Although David had emphasized his desire that Absalom be taken alive and unharmed, once again the brutish Joab prefers to deal with things in his own way. Joab coldly kills an unarmed, helpless Absalom, in violent repayment for the ways that Absalom has deceived him and used him. Absalom's ridiculous monument to himself is all that remains of a talented but foolish man.

The rebellion of Absalom was avoidable, but it became inevitable when David did not see the danger in time. Yet, even though David had done much to create a bad situation, God's hand was still with him, and David was delivered by God's grace. For all of David's sins, he did love God, and God loved David back infinitely more.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Ten: No War, But No Peace (2 Samuel 18:19-19:43)

The rebellion led by Absalom brought more violence, division, and hatred to a land that had already endured too much of these things. Sadly, even when the military action ends, there is still no real peace. David's emotions cloud his judgment, impairing his leadership ability and eventually provoking new divisions and resentments among the people.

Throughout the rebellion of his son Absalom, David has desperately hoped to get his kingdom back without his wayward son being harmed personally. So when he learns of Absalom's death - itself one more act of senseless violence on the part of David's cousin Joab - he is distraught (18:19-33). Despite his grievous character faults, David was a sensitive man, and he must have had an awareness of his own role in his family's tragedies.

The volatile Joab, for his part, rebukes the king harshly (19:1-8a). Although most of what Joab says here is quite true, he is also being self-serving, since it was he who murdered the defenseless Absalom in disobedience to the king's orders. Every time we see David with Joab, David gives in to his hot-headed cousin. David has passed up chance after chance to restrain this violent, cruel man, but he has not done so. Joab was too useful to David, who tolerated Joab out of self-interest and a timid unwillingness to confront Joab directly. Those with leadership responsibilities should learn from this sad example of how not to deal with a problem.

David's return to Jerusalem is accompanied by a series of vignettes, some encouraging and some sadly amusing (19:8b-38). The majority of the Israelites had joined Absalom, and they now live in terrified expectation of retribution from the king, although David's gracious sincerity does win over the leaders of his own tribe, Judah. Meanwhile, some of those who had taken advantage of David's struggles now eagerly welcome him back and fawn over him, creating an amusing if distasteful scene. David is gracious in victory, and leniently resolves all conflicts and misunderstandings. He is also able to thank the elderly Barzillai, a true friend who had stood by David when things looked hopeless.

But what should have been a time for relief and thankfulness just leads to new problems, as resentment and distrust spreads across the nation (19:39-43). Worn out and disheartened by Absalom's death, David provides little leadership now, leaving it to others to set the tone and priorities for the nation. Soon, harsh bickering breaks out between David's tribe of Judah and the other tribes of Israel, and this in turn will soon lead to a new outbreak of fighting.

This long sequence of unpleasant events all arose from David's inexcusable behavior with Bathsheba. Since then, he has never regained genuine respect or effective authority in the eyes of the nation as a whole – nor will he ever do so again. His sins against Bathsheba and Uriah, in turn, stemmed from his unwillingness to address or acknowledge his lustfulness and his tendency towards violence, even though God had given him many chances to do so. The Scripture records all of the miserable times that have followed, not because they illustrate 'punishment' from God, but to show us why we should listen more closely to God in the first place.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Eleven: Stuck In A Vicious Circle (2 Samuel 20:1-21:22)

Absalom's rebellion had painfully divided the nation, and it had led to numerous personal tragedies. Once it ended, we might have expected the people to be grateful for peace; and we may have hoped for David once again to regain their trust and loyalty. Instead, the lull after Absalom's death is just part of a cycle of disturbances that won't end any time soon.

Israel's increasing dissatisfaction with David makes it easy for a new troublemaker to lead a revolt (20:1-7). A Benjamite named Sheba exploits the nation's surly mood, and is recognized as the leader of all the tribes except for Judah. A disheartened David does not deal with the problem himself. Instead, he expends his energy on arrangements for his concubines that are as insensitive as they are inexplicable, and he leaves the defense of the kingdom to his subordinates.

David's lack of responsibility creates a rivalry between the loyal but ineffective Amasa and the brutal Joab (20:8-13). Joab resolves things in his usual way, by murdering a defenseless Amasa in a deceitful and craven fashion. As the armies of Judah march off to battle the rebels, they pass the gruesome sight of Amasa's corpse, reminding them that Sheba is not their only worry.

The rebel leader Sheba owes his popularity to dissatisfaction with David, not to Sheba's own abilities (20:9-26). His grasp of strategy is nonexistent, for he quickly finds himself cornered inside a town and cut off from most of his supporters. The town is besieged, and when the people realize the cause of their misfortune, it takes them little time to act: they unceremoniously cut off Sheba's head and toss it over the wall, suddenly ending a once-promising career.

This is not the end of David's troubles, for now a lengthy famine hits, leading to further grim developments (21:1-14). The famine is a legacy from Saul's reign, for God indicates that Saul's violation of trust towards the Gibeonites requires punishment (the Gibeonites had been granted a long-standing promise of protection by Israel, but Saul had apparently violated the terms of it, due to his characteristic policy of pursuing action at the expense of understanding).

David selects seven of Saul's descendants, and hands them over to the Gibeonites to be killed and mutilated. A weird and rather disturbing situation that, we are told, had God's approval - at least insofar as God ended the famine. Since the Scriptures do not detail the original offense, it is possible that David simply identified those relations of Saul who joined in it. But all we can know with certainty is that this kind of brutal atonement graphically illustrates the consequences of human sin, in an era when once-for-all forgiveness had not yet come. We should not use this kind of event to support violent punishments in our own day, for the Messiah's blood makes blood punishments unnecessary now.

After this, Israel experiences a brief period of unity, with another successful battle against the Philistines (21:15-22). So another series of events in Israel has seen a mix of violence and grace, defeats and victories. Having a king, even a faithful king like David, does not prevent the worst - and sometimes it causes the worst to happen. But God is always God; and if we stop putting our faith in other things, then we find out how much more worthy of our trust God is.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009*

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Twelve: David's Legacy (2 Samuel 22:1-23:39)

David's reign as king was ultimately a failure: repeated rebellions, one of them led by his own son; constant division, disorder, and bloodshed; and widespread dissatisfaction and bickering. David's family life was a mess, and his personal behavior was often barbarous. Yet he is usually remembered not for any of these things, but for being "a man after God's own heart". In these two chapters, we can perhaps see some of the reasons why this could still be so.

David's great song of praise shows us the side of him that God valued so highly (22:1-51; see also Psalm 18). Here David praises God's steadfastness and constancy, which have been to David a constant source of hope and comfort. David is a humble man in spite of his many faults, and he is well aware that he himself is no rock. David tries to be obedient to God, but he is often disobedient and sinful. Yet God's own infinite compassion and constant faithfulness have kept David safely in God's care.

Perhaps most importantly of all, God has always remained faithful to the covenant he has made with David. God has blessed David when David deserved blessing, and he has blessed David when David deserved punishment instead. This passage is a psalm of praise to God, just as all the good things that David has done were done for God and were done through God's strength.

Though David's life is not yet over, the writer of Samuel intersperses at this point the king's last words (23:1-7). Although the later years of David's reign brought constant disorder and disappointment, we can see that David loves God to the end, and also that David's confidence remains in the covenant God has made with him. The reality of David's character is quite different from the stereotype of a perfectly obedient servant that many Christians have of him – but the truth about him is far more useful, for God loves David as much as he ever did.

The writer of Samuel also recalls at this point some of the exploits of David's 'mighty men' (23:8-39). Many of these recollections come from better days, before the king had lost most of his popularity and support. When he was at his best, David was able to encourage and motivate those who in the world's eyes were of little value. We cannot know how much faith these other persons had, but we do know that it was David's faith that enabled him to pass along a sense of confidence and purpose to others.

To a believer, David's legacy is not that of pure, obedient servant. It is instead the example of a sinful, often foolish person who nevertheless did love God. Thus David teaches us not that we can become perfectly obedient, but something more important. David's example teaches those of us who are sinful and foolish that we, too, can be men and women "after God's own heart".

Like David, we cannot develop a strong relationship with God based on our own good deeds and perfect thoughts. But we can enjoy God's compassion and blessing through the faith and love we feel for God (small though these things may be), and through the all-encompassing grace and mercy that God eagerly shows to those who love and seek him.

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EXALTED BE GOD, THE ROCK: THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

Week Thirteen: Sin & Repentance (2 Samuel 24:1-25)

As David's long reign nears its close, he commits one more grievous and unnecessary mistake. Although this is another low point, it also gives us another illustration of why God loved David in spite of his many serious sins. David can be willfully disobedient and sinful, yet when he sees what he has done, his repentance is sincere and his determination to return to God is heartfelt.

It is interesting that the writer of Samuel does not directly explain what was so bad about David's ill-fated decision to make a census of his army; the Scriptures merely tell us how displeased God was with Israel (24:1-9). Comparing this passage with the account in Chronicles, we also find some interesting differences in the details (see 1 Chronicles 21). But, since even the brutish, cold-hearted Joab realizes what a blunder this is, we can tell that there is not some secret, obscure reason for God's displeasure.

There is nothing wrong with a census when God requests it. But David's desire to count his soldiers suggests pride and false security (some commentators also consider that the king could be using the census as a prelude to a mass conscription). David, of all persons, should know that God's presence is much more important than earthly counts or numbers. David has seen many occasions on which God's presence turned the tables on a far superior force. But then, we too have had a great many demonstrations of God's strength and wisdom, and we too often forget.

Afterwards, the king suddenly realizes that what he has done will have serious consequences (24:10-17). Sadly, this is often the case with our own willful sins. We rationalize and defend our desires until we seize the chance to satisfy them, and only afterwards do we come to our senses and realize our error. David's regret and repentance are genuine, but it would have been so much better if he had awakened in time from his foolish desires. Because he repents, he will live; but because he sinned, there are painful consequences for him and for others.

Although David is consumed with sorrow and self-reproach, his spiritual vision is now as clear as ever (24:18-25). Learning that he must make a sacrificial altar in order to stop the plague that has come upon Israel, he accepts full responsibility. He declines the offer of free land - not because he thinks that paying for it will earn him God's favor, but simply because a 'sacrifice' that costs nothing is not a real sacrifice. So too, God does not need most of the things we sacrifice to him, but sacrifices that cost something are always pleasing to him for their own sake.

The book of 2 Samuel closes as the sun is setting on David's reign. In 1 Kings, we see his final days and the troubled time of transition that follows in Israel. But for now, we can look back over David's long, eventful life, and see it in its proper perspective. While most of us will not experience the extremes of faithful victory and horrible sin that David lived through, our own lives are much closer to David's than we think. Our sins and acts of disobedience become hopelessly entangled with our spiritual victories and displays of faithfulness. But God's covenant is unchanging and his compassion is enduring, for us just as it was for David.

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