

THE LIFE OF DAVID

by Robert C. Walton

THE LIFE OF DAVID I

Early Years

This summer we will be embarking upon a study of the life of David. Obviously, we will not be able to cover the events of the great king's life thoroughly in ten weeks, but we will be able to examine the highlights. Since the Bible tells us that its narratives are recorded for our admonition, we should expect that the example set by David will be instructive for us, in good ways and bad. We should also anticipate learning from the ways in which God worked in David's life.

David was truly a remarkable person. From humble beginnings, he went on to become the greatest king in the history of the nation of Israel. Others were wealthier, others ruled more territory, others even won more battles, but none rivaled David for leadership ability. He was not only a great leader, however. He was also a man of great spiritual sensitivity, a "man after God's own heart," the "sweet psalmist of Israel." His writings in the Psalms provide the greatest sustained record of spiritual experience anywhere in the Scriptures.

Today we will be looking at the little the Bible tells us about the early years of David, up until the time of his anointing by Samuel. This information is recorded for us in I Samuel 16.

THE ISRAEL OF DAVID'S YOUTH

David grew up in a politically chaotic era. Israel had just finished about three and a half centuries under the rule of the judges, during which the people had repeatedly experienced subjugation at the hands of a variety of foreign powers and Canaanite tribes. Samuel had brought some stability to the situation, but the people clamored for a king "like the other nations." God gave them what they wanted, though He warned them that they wouldn't like what they got.

When Samuel chose Saul to be Israel's first king, he couldn't have picked anyone who looked the part better. Saul was "head and shoulders" above his other countrymen - big, strong, and, unfortunately, neither very bright nor very godly. After a few early victories, Saul's power went to his head and he began to take God's prerogatives into his own hands. He lost the people's respect when he ordered the death of his own son Jonathan for breaking a foolish decree (I Samuel 14) and lost God's favor when he arrogated to himself the task that only a priest could rightly fulfill - offering sacrifices to God (I Samuel 13) - and later disobeyed a clear command of God when he failed to exterminate the Amalekites completely after God gave Israel victory over them (I Samuel 15). The result was that God, through Samuel, told Saul that he would lose control of the kingdom and that it would pass into the hands of a better man.

DAVID ANOINTED KING

The "better man" whom God chose was David. David was the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, a wealthy man in the town of Bethlehem, located in the territory of Judah about six miles southeast of Jerusalem. As the youngest son in the family, David was given the least desirable jobs, including watching over the family flock. This was not only a dirty and menial job, but it was also one that had little respect among the Israelites. Shepherds were constantly incurring ceremonial uncleanness and were therefore often considered unfit for the worship of God. Despite the nature of the work, David apparently acquitted himself well in the task, protecting his father's sheep with considerable valor when they were attacked by dangerous wild beasts (a lion and a bear).

When God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king, he told Samuel to go to the home of Jesse and anoint one of his sons, but didn't tell him which one to anoint. When Samuel saw the eldest son, Eliab, he was convinced that he need look no further. The strapping young man looked every inch a king. Samuel should have known better after the fiasco with Saul, but God needed to tell him that Eliab was not the right man. The next six sons appeared in succession, but God told Samuel that they, too, had been rejected for the royal post. Exasperated, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any sons left. Almost as an afterthought, Jesse mentioned his youngest son, who was out in the pasture with the sheep. Samuel insisted that David be summoned, and God told him that the youngest was indeed His choice for the throne. David appeared, and Samuel saw that he was a strong, good-looking young man (not at all the "wimp" that he is sometimes made out to be by those who wish to magnify his victory over Goliath). Samuel then anointed him on the spot to be the new king of Israel.

DAVID IN THE COURT OF SAUL

Shortly after Samuel anointed David to be the new king of Israel, he was summoned to the court of Saul. The reason for this was that Saul, having been rejected by God, was tormented by an "evil spirit from the Lord." Apparently the only thing that would calm his foul temper when this occurred was soothing music. David, along with all his other talents, had established a reputation as a skilled musician, and one of Saul's men recommended that he bring the youngest son of Jesse to serve in his presence. David's music did soothe Saul's temper when the fits came upon him, so Saul kept David with him and made him one of his armor-bearers. David was thus in a position to observe the goings-on in court, which helped prepare him for the day when he would himself become the king of Israel.

APPLICATIONS

What applications can we draw from the brief account of David's early life? Begin by asking your class what they think this narrative was intended to teach us. While many possible applications exist, the following may be worth your consideration.

Perhaps the most obvious application of the passage comes from the chapter's most familiar verse, I Samuel 16:7. When it comes to leadership qualities, God looks more than skin deep. While Christians may easily recognize that appearance is a shallow way to evaluate capacity for leadership (despite the ways in which candidates for high office in our country are chosen), it is also important to note that God's assessment penetrated deeper than the area of talents. Eliab and his other brothers were skilled as well as handsome. They were not rejected by God because of lack of talent. Instead, David was chosen by God because he alone had the heart that would make him a great king. While only God knows the heart of a person, we should nonetheless do all we can to discern the heart of one we would place in a position of leadership over us.

In a broader context, the same principle applies in our involvement with society at large. We live in a world in which people make shallow judgments based only on the slimmest of evidence. We must not allow the shallow judgments of others to control our feelings about ourselves and the value of what we are and do. We as Christians must remember that we are accountable to God and that our actions must be such as to pass His scrutiny. If He judges our work to be good and faithful, the judgment of others matters little.

Secondly, we may note that, even as a young man, David had begun exercising the gifts that would later serve him well as king. He was already honing his skills as a warrior and a musician. As he used the

talents God had given him, these talents were recognized by others, who then gave him further opportunity to serve. Our children must be encouraged to use the abilities God has given them at a young age. As we use our talents, God provides opportunities for more extensive service. It is through such means that God guides His children into lifelong areas of service to others.

Thirdly, we may note, for the first of many times in this course, the patience of David in being willing to wait for what God had already promised to him. While David is not listed in Hebrews 11, he certainly is a good example of one who lives by faith while waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise. Would it have been easy for you to serve a man who occupied the place that had been promised to you, even though you knew that God had rejected him as a self-aggrandizing fool?

Lastly, we should notice the attitude of Jesse through all this. Parents often baby their youngest offspring because they are reluctant to see them leave home. We see none of this in Jesse. He willingly sent his son off to the court of Saul, allowing God to work out his perfect plan for the young man. David thus became the vehicle through which God brought a godly monarchy to Israel, replacing the monarchy of Saul, the people's choice. He also became the ancestor of the Great King, Jesus the Messiah.

THE LIFE OF DAVID II

David and Goliath

There is no single incident in the life of David that is more familiar than his battle with Goliath, the Philistine giant. As with all familiar stories, the challenge for the teacher is to give life to what is well known through background information and pertinent application.

ISRAEL AND THE PHILISTINES

The Philistines were originally from the Mediterranean island of Crete (the Minoan civilization that flourished in the second millennium B.C.), but had migrated to Palestine, to which they gave their name, by the time of the patriarchs. Abraham and Isaac both had encounters with them.

At the time of the Conquest under Joshua the Philistines controlled no territory, but by his death they had established themselves in the five cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, Ashdod, and Ekron in southwestern Palestine. The first recorded battle between Israel and the Philistines was under the valiant Shamgar (Judges 3:31), who used an ox goad to kill six hundred Philistine raiders.

The era of conflict between Israel and the Philistines really began in the day of Samson, however. The Philistines sought control over Israel's territory, and their constant pressure led to repeated battles. Samson enjoyed military success despite his moral failures, but was not able to drive the Philistines from the land, or even give Israel sovereignty over them.

The conflict continued during the days of Samuel and Saul. The Philistines succeeded in capturing the Ark of the Covenant in a battle led by the wicked sons of Eli, but they soon decided they would be better off returning it to its original owners. Saul won a few battles against the Philistines, but was unable to maintain control of the land he conquered.

The land under dispute between the two groups was the Judean hill country. This fertile region lay between the Philistine coastal cities and the central mountain range, controlled by Israel. It was in this region that the armies of Israel and Philistia met to do battle in I Samuel 17.

WARFARE IN THE TIME OF DAVID

The warfare in the Middle East a thousand years before the time of Christ seems oddly civilized by today's standards. For strategic reasons, the armies camped on the hilltops and fought in the intervening valleys. Weapons included spears and swords made of bronze and iron. In this area, though, the Philistines had a decided advantage, since during their years of control of the region they had forbidden the establishment of blacksmith shops in Israel. Thus the Israelites were for the most part reduced to fighting with farm implements (I Samuel 13:19-22), which were no match for the Philistine armor.

The scene that greets us in I Samuel 17 was fairly common practice. It is easy to understand why. In an agricultural economy where wealth and survival depended upon manpower, no one wanted to lose men needlessly in battle. Thus, when the armies were fairly evenly matched, the commanders would often agree to decide the battle by individual combat. In this way, less blood was shed in determining the outcome. Both the victor and the vanquished retained most of their manpower, thus ensuring the survival of the tribe, even though it may be in servitude.

The Philistine champion was a huge warrior named Goliath, who was over nine feet tall and was strong enough to wear armor weighing over a hundred pounds and throw a spear the point of which was heavier than a modern shot put. Under the circumstances, it is easy to understand why the Philistines offered to settle the issue by single combat, and just as easy to see why the Israelites stalled for over a month while the Philistines repeatedly issued their challenge.

DAVID TAKES THE CHALLENGE

As we saw last week, David was by this time one of Saul's armor-bearers. Apparently this post was little more than ceremonial. David's real responsibility was to provide music to soothe the fits of anger and depression into which Saul periodically fell. Even so, David did not spend all his time at court, but traveled back and forth between Saul's headquarters and his home in Bethlehem, where he continued to take responsibility for his father's flocks. To the king, David was no more than a nameless face at court.

When war with the Philistines threatened to break out again, Jesse's three oldest sons went off to join Saul's army. David served as messenger boy, taking food to his brothers and bringing home news of the battle (which at this point didn't amount to much). Saul obviously didn't know that David had been anointed the next king of Israel, and the fact doesn't seem to have impressed his brothers very much, either. When David arrived, they rudely told him to go back to tending sheep and insisted that he had merely brought food as an excuse to watch the battle.

When David heard Goliath's challenge, however, he didn't react in the same way that Saul's soldiers had done. Rather than responding in fear, he felt nothing but anger and indignation at the blasphemous words of the giant. Confident that the Lord would defeat His enemy, he offered to take up the challenge.

Considering what was at stake, Saul acquiesced rather readily. Perhaps he had already given the battle up for lost and simply didn't want to lose any of his best men. Whatever the reason, Saul seemed willing to place the freedom of Israel on the shoulders of the strong young shepherd boy from Bethlehem. When he offered David the use of his armor, the young man declined. Saul, after all, was exceptionally tall, and the royal armor would have been more of a hindrance than a help to the nimble young warrior.

Instead, David chose to arm himself with a weapon with which he was familiar - the shepherd's sling, useful in chasing away predators in the wilderness. This was really an excellent piece of strategy for a number of reasons. First of all, the sling could be used at long range. It was accurate far beyond the range of sword and spear alike. Secondly, while stones propelled from a sling could not penetrate armor, they could, when hurled at tremendous speed with the skill of a practiced user of the weapon, find those gaps not covered by the soldier's armor. One such gap was the forehead, which was not completely covered by the helmet. David's first stone, moving faster than any Nolan Ryan fastball (and about the same size; stones like those described in the passage have been found in the region), found its mark and fractured the skull of the giant. David then ran forward, seized Goliath's sword, and cut off the giant's head. Israel had triumphed over a well-equipped army using nothing but a shepherd's sling.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE

The Philistines flew into a panic upon seeing the death of their champion. They turned and ran for home as fast as they could go, but they were not fast enough to elude the pursuing Israelites. The men of Saul chased the Philistines all the way back to their home cities, slaughtering stragglers all along the route.

Meanwhile, David brought the head of Goliath back to Jerusalem and kept the giant's weapons as personal trophies of his victory. [This tidbit of information is a bit of a puzzle since David did not conquer Jerusalem until after he took the throne in II Samuel 5:6-10. Some scholars have suggested that he brought Goliath's head to the Jebusite city in order to warn them that their own time was coming, an act for which historical precedents existed.]

Saul had been so wrapped up in his own problems that he never bothered to pay much attention to the young musician who soothed him when the evil spirit came upon him. But now that David had become a hero, the king needed to know who he was. Saul sought him out and inquired about his identity, then made him a permanent member of the royal court. It was this new position occupied by David that allowed him to develop a bond of friendship with Saul's son Jonathan, and also set the stage for the jealousy that eventually forced David into hiding.

APPLICATIONS

What can we learn from the story of David and Goliath? Again, the story is so familiar that it would be best to begin this closing section by letting the members of your class suggest possible applications. The following might be worth noting.

Perhaps the most obvious application may be drawn from the fact that David, alone among the Israelites, recognized that the battle was the Lord's. He knew that he would not be fighting Goliath in his own strength. Thus, his evaluation of the wisdom of joining battle differed significantly from that of those around him. When we assess a particular course of action, how often are we paralyzed by uncertainty because we consider only factors on the human level? This is not to suggest that Christians are not to be prudent. However, we must realize that, when God fights for His people, the odds by which we calculate courses of action are radically altered.

A second lesson is that we should not despise youthful enthusiasm. David's older brothers gave him little respect because of his relative youthfulness and inexperience. Yet David saw the issue more clearly than his more experienced companions. If this battle had been left to the experts, it would have been lost. We have much to learn by listening to younger Christians, particularly those who have clearly been empowered by the Spirit of God.

A third lesson may be drawn from David's response to Saul's offer of his armor. In the same way that one cannot fight effectively using someone else's weapons, so one cannot exercise someone else's gifts in ministering within the church. When we serve God, it is important that we "be ourselves," at least in the sense that we use what God has given us rather than trying to imitate the ministry of someone else whose gifts differ from our own.

A fourth application comes from looking at the reason for David's anger toward Goliath. David was not angry because Goliath had insulted Israel, but because the giant had slandered the living God. Too often, our anger is motivated by insufficient causes. On the other hand, we often fail to get angry when the name of God is being dragged through the mud. David, "a man after God's own heart," felt pain when God was insulted, but virtually ignored slights directed against himself (compare his response to Eliab with what he said to Goliath). Shouldn't we do the same?

On a larger scale, a fifth application comes from realizing that God will always provide for His people in time of need. Though that help may come from an unexpected source, God accomplishes His purposes, despite the human failures that constantly surround us.

THE LIFE OF DAVID III

Saul's Jealousy and Jonathan's Friendship

David and Jonathan provide one of the best examples of friendship to be found in all of Scripture. Despite the abuse of the story by those who would read perverse implications into it, the friendship of these two men provides a useful model for our instruction. Today's lesson is taken from I Samuel 18-20.

DAVID'S RAPID RISE TO PROMINENCE

After the death of Goliath, David became an instant celebrity in Israel. On the way home from the battle, women thronged the streets to sing the praises of the young warrior who had saved the Israelites from slavery at the hands of the Philistines. When their songs of adulation compared David favorably with the king, there were signs of trouble on the horizon.

Saul could not afford to waste David's obvious talents, so he promoted him to a permanent position in court. He frequently sent David out on expeditions against the Philistines (despite the terms of the trial by single combat and the rout of the Philistines that followed Goliath's death, the Israelites apparently had not managed to subdue their enemies; as usual, Saul failed to follow through on an initial military advantage and accomplish total victory). David was successful in carrying out these raids and was quickly promoted through the ranks of the army (surprisingly, without arousing jealousy among the older commanding officers). When he was not off fighting the Philistines, David remained in court, playing his harp to soothe Saul's vile temper when he fell into one of his black moods.

David became so important that Saul even offered him marriage into the royal family. As we will see later, Saul had ulterior motives, but David, in his innocence, rejected the offer, not because he was suspicious, but because he couldn't afford the rich dowry that usually was required in order to form an alliance with royalty (under normal circumstances, the father of the bride would have to provide a dowry to the husband; with royalty the rules were apparently somewhat different). Saul then married his eldest daughter to someone else. Saul's younger daughter Michal was in love with David, however, and begged to be allowed to marry him. The combination of a more congenial marriage partner (at least that's what David thought at the time; Michal turned out to be a difficult wife) and a dowry demand that, while grisly, was unquestionably within David's means, convinced David to accept Saul's offer, and he became part of the royal family by marriage. Thus, in relatively short order, David rose from being an eighth-born son of an obscure family, keeping his father's flocks in the wilderness, to a national hero, renowned warrior, and son-in-law to the king.

SAUL'S JEALOUSY AND MURDEROUS INTENT

Anyone who rises so quickly is bound to make enemies, and David was no exception. The problem was that his enemy was the most powerful man in the land - the king himself. Since Saul had been rejected by God, everything in his life seemed to be falling apart and he had become a very insecure man. Like Herod the Great in the New Testament, Saul saw threats to his throne under every rock and behind every tree. The irony of his attitude, of course, is that David, who had been chosen by God to take Saul's throne, was perfectly content to wait for God's time and had no desire to overthrow the monarch.

Saul's jealousy quickly escalated into thoughts of murder, and when his dark moods came upon him, those thoughts became actions. Twice while David was playing his harp to soothe Saul's temper, the king

seized his javelin and hurled it at the young musician. Then when Saul saw that David was too nimble to be pinned to the wall by a spear, he devised more subtle tactics. The offer of his eldest daughter in marriage was at first intended as a distraction. Saul hoped that David would attempt some foolhardy act of bravado in order to repay the king's favor. When David refused to take the bait, Saul was frustrated, but Michal's profession of love for David gave him another chance. By offering Michal for the price of two hundred Philistine foreskins, Saul hoped that David would take on the dangerous quest with stars in his eyes and, blinded by love, fall at the hands of his enemies.

As time passed, Saul's efforts to kill David became less subtle and more desperate. Next, he ordered his son Jonathan and his attendants to kill David on sight. Jonathan first warned David of his father's intention, then talked Saul out of it. Saul swore an oath to spare David, but the oath didn't last very long. Again the king hurled his spear in fury at David. This time, David himself realized that his continued presence at court was foolish and he prepared to leave. Saul was not ready to give up, however, and sent soldiers to David's house to kill him before he could escape. This time, Michal warned him, and after being confronted by her father, lied to Saul and told him that David had threatened to kill her if she did not help him to escape.

David then fled to Ramah to hide with Samuel and the prophets who accompanied him. Saul repeatedly sent soldiers to kill David, but each one was seized with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy. Finally Saul himself came to Ramah, but he, too, was taken by the Spirit and never accomplished his mission. From this point onward, Saul's obsession in life was to destroy David. He committed his time, energies, and armies to the task of removing this young man, whom he saw as the major threat to his ruling dynasty.

JONATHAN AND DAVID

As we have seen, David was never really a threat to Saul, and yet Saul devoted all his energy to the task of killing David. On the other hand, David was a genuine threat to Saul's son Jonathan - after all, when Samuel anointed David as king, that meant that Jonathan would not be able to succeed his father on the throne. Jonathan had already established himself as a brave and capable warrior (see I Samuel 14). Rather than seeing David as a rival, however, he saw him as a companion with whom he had much in common. After David was installed permanently in the royal court, Jonathan and David became close friends. Jonathan gave David some of his clothing as a sign of their friendship. Later he warned David of Saul's murderous intention and once talked his father out of trying to kill David.

When it became obvious that David could no longer remain at the royal court, Jonathan prepared a plan to warn him of Saul's current mood (despite the lie it entailed, which could hardly be justified). Before David left, Jonathan made a covenant with him. The agreement they made showed clearly that Jonathan knew all about David's future. He was not concerned at all about his lost opportunity to ascend the throne of Israel. Instead, he wanted to be sure that David would care for his family after he became king (this was no idle request; as we will see in a later lesson, it was common practice for one who became king to exterminate the family of his predecessor in order to avoid having any potential rivals for the throne, and thus avoid civil war). In the process of protecting David, Jonathan himself had to dodge his father's spear (it seems that Saul's first move when he was angry was to throw his spear at the nearest target) and endure curses and insults. He did succeed, however, in getting David safely out of Saul's clutches.

APPLICATIONS

Again, there are a number of applications that may be drawn from this portion of the life of David. We will look at lessons from David's dealings with Saul and then lessons from the relationship between David and Jonathan.

From Saul's actions against David, we can see that virtue is not always rewarded - at least not immediately. David could not possibly have conducted himself in a more upright manner in the court of Saul. He waited patiently for God's time and did everything possible to minimize his threat to the touchy king. He served him faithfully and willingly played his harp when the king became depressed. When Saul responded with unjust anger and attempts to murder David, Israel's next king questioned neither himself nor God. Instead of feeling sorry for himself and wondering whether God might have forgotten him, he simply persevered in faithful service and waited for justice to come from the hand of the Lord (admittedly, David was not always able to take such a calm attitude toward his persecutors; the Psalms give us numerous examples of David's frustration with Saul's persecution and God's seeming lack of support during the years of hiding in the Judean wilderness).

David does, however, provide a good example of how to respond to unjust or downright vicious authorities. Many of us have had to face at one time or another a boss, teacher, or even spouse who was completely unreasonable and unfair. David's example of patience and faithful service can be a great encouragement to one who is suffering similar treatment.

As far as David's relationship with Jonathan is concerned, it provides a good illustration of the value of friendship. Jonathan supported David when the latter was in need, and David later kept his promise and helped Jonathan's family after the young prince had been killed in battle and David had ascended the throne. The interesting thing about the friendship between the two men is that it was almost always one-sided. Too often we look for mutuality in our friendships - you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. But as long as Jonathan was alive, he was the giver and David was the taker; it was only after Jonathan's death that David was in a position to give. Friendship should not be based on demands of equal give and take, but on the needs of those with whom we enter into relationships. Giving and receiving need not be measured out in a balance. After all, where would we be if Jesus Christ had taken that attitude in His friendship with His people?

Secondly, the friendship of David and Jonathan was deep and powerful because it was rooted in their faith in God. In the same way that the deepest of marriage bonds may only be forged "in the Lord," so the deepest of friendships are formed when two people share a common faith and a common loyalty to God. Only when two people are committed to the Lord may they be unswervingly committed to one another.

Finally, we should note that God uses other people to bring about His purposes in our lives. Rather than miraculous intervention on David's behalf, God provided Jonathan in David's time of need. He still works through people today, and as we act as true friends to one another, we find that God works through us to meet one another's needs and help each of us through the conflicts of our lives.

THE LIFE OF DAVID IV

David the Fugitive

Unlike the first three lessons in this series, this lesson will survey a period in the life of David rather than concentrating on a specific incident. Our attention today will be given to the period during which David was fleeing the wrath of Saul and living as a fugitive in the Judean wilderness. Biblical material on this period in David's life may be found in I Samuel 21-31. [NOTE: We will omit consideration of David's encounter with Nabal and Abigail because that will be the subject of next week's lesson.]

DAVID'S FLIGHT (I Samuel 21-22)

When Jonathan got word to David that Saul was still intent on David's death, David and his men (remember that by this time he had become a commander in Saul's army) fled and headed for the wilderness. Because they had left in such a hurry, they had no provisions and very little in the way of weapons. They stopped at Nob, where the Tabernacle was then set up, and asked the priest, Ahimelech, for help. The only food he had available was the Bread of the Presence. After having been removed from the table in the Holy Place, this bread was to be eaten by the priests. Ahimelech willingly gave it to David and his men, however, after ascertaining that they were in a state of ceremonial cleanliness (Jesus used this incident to argue for the legitimacy of works of necessity on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-4). He also gave David Goliath's great sword, which apparently had been stored in the Tabernacle, either for safekeeping or in thanksgiving to God for the victory over the giant.

David and his men then headed southwest to the Philistine city of Gath. This may seem like a peculiar thing for David to do - one would think he would have been regarded as Public Enemy Number One in Philistia. David apparently assumed, because the Philistines were enemies of Saul and he now was considered an enemy by Saul, that the Philistines would be willing to protect him. He thought wrongly. When Achish, the king of Gath, heard of David's presence in his midst, his advisers informed him that David had been anointed king of Israel. David, fearful that Achish would harm him, feigned madness (the insane were considered to be partakers of a special visitation of the gods, and thus were under the protection of the gods; no pagan king of the era would dare to harm an insane person), and thus saved his life.

When it became obvious that he was not safe in Philistia, David and his men headed for the Judean wilderness (that rocky and barren area between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, where Jesus was tempted by Satan and where the Essene community at Qumran copied and hid the Dead Sea Scrolls), and established their headquarters in the cave of Adullam. Here David became a sort of eleventh century B.C. Robin Hood. Many people were displeased with the rule of Saul, and those who had been mistreated by the king, or who had other reasons for discontent, gathered together under David's leadership (it is interesting to note that his brothers were among those who became part of his loyal following). David moved his parents across the Jordan into Moab, placing them under the protection of the king of Moab.

Meanwhile, Saul heard that David had escaped and began to berate his camp followers for not keeping him informed about David's activities. Finally Doeg the Edomite, a despised shepherd, told Saul that he had been at Nob when David and his men had passed through. He reported the exchange between David and Ahimelech. Saul then sent for the priests. Ahimelech maintained his innocence of the whole affair (indeed, he had not known that David was fleeing from Saul; David had lied, telling the priest that he was on a mission for the king). This did not convince Saul, however, who ordered his guard to kill the priests. The guards were reluctant to raise their hands against the priests of the Lord, but the opportunistic

Doeg showed no such restraint. He slaughtered eighty-five priests, then took a group of men to Nob and destroyed the city - men, women, children, and livestock. Only Abiathar the son of Ahimelech survived, and he fled to David's stronghold with the terrible news.

SAUL'S PURSUIT (I Samuel 23, 24, 26)

Meanwhile, David had moved out of the stronghold at Adullam on the advice of Gad the prophet and had set up camp in the forest of Hereth, which was much closer to the inhabited part of the land. While in Hereth, he heard that the Philistines had attacked Keilah, a city in the Judean hill country between Jerusalem and Philistia. David wanted to take his men and drive off the Philistines, but the men were reluctant, fearing that they would reveal their whereabouts to Saul. When David consulted the Lord, however, God told him to go through with the attack. David and his men then routed the Philistines and delivered Keilah.

As David's men had feared, the battle at Keilah exposed them to their most dangerous enemy, king Saul. Saul intended to trap David inside the walled city by laying siege to it. David inquired of the Lord through Abiathar the priest (it is impossible to be sure exactly how this was done; presumably it involved the Urim and Thummim in the breastplate of the High Priest), and was told that, if Saul besieged the city, the inhabitants would turn him and his men over to the king (such gratitude!). David then left the city and returned to the wilderness. When Saul heard that David had left Keilah, he decided against the siege and instead sent his men into the wilderness in pursuit of David. The inhabitants of Ziph reported David's whereabouts to Saul, and he personally led his army into the wilderness to capture his rival. Just as he was about to overtake David - they were on opposite sides of the same mountain - Saul received word that the Philistines had again invaded the land and he broke off his pursuit of David in order to counter this latest Philistine threat.

After repulsing the Philistines, Saul returned to the task of finding David. Again, his spies brought him intelligence of David's whereabouts, though he did not know the specific location of David and his men. This lack of specific knowledge became obvious when Saul stopped to relieve himself in a cave, not realizing that David and his men were hiding in the back of that same cave. David's men insisted that God had delivered the king into their hands and were prepared to surround and kill him. David forbid this, but his mischievous streak surfaced at this point. When Saul took off his cloak to answer the call of nature, David cut off a small piece of it. Even this small act of defiance bothered his conscience, however. When Saul left the cave, David called out to him and told him of his narrow escape from death. David argued that the incident demonstrated that he had no intention of harming the king. Saul was so touched by this that he acknowledged that David would be the next king of Israel, asked him to care for his family, and called off his pursuit of David.

Saul's resolve did not last long, however. When Samuel died, the last restraint on Saul's evil intentions died with him. Following the incident involving Nabal and Abigail (which we will cover next week), the treacherous Ziphites again reported David's location to Saul. The king again sent out his troops to find and destroy David and his men. When David found out where Saul had made his camp, he and several of his men crept into the king's encampment in the middle of the night. David's men again encouraged him to kill the sleeping monarch, but David refused. Instead, he took Saul's spear and water jug. After making their escape, David called out to the sleeping camp. He told them what he had done and again argued that Saul's pursuit of him was both unjust and foolish. Saul again felt remorse and called off the chase.

DAVID AMONG THE PHILISTINES (I Samuel 27, 29, 30)

This time, David did not make the mistake of thinking that Saul would now leave him alone for good. He suspected that the only thing that could get Saul off his trail would be for him to leave the country. Consequently, he headed again for Gath, where he was received cordially by Achish the king, who now apparently had enough evidence to convince him that David was indeed considered an enemy by Saul.

David and his men brought their families with them, and Achish allowed them to settle in the city of Ziklag in Philistia. They lived in Ziklag for sixteen months. David and his men supported themselves by conducting raids on Israel's other enemies, such as the Amalekites. Whenever they attacked a village, they would destroy it completely and bring back the plunder. They would then lie to Achish, telling him that they had destroyed some Judean city. Achish thus became convinced that David could never return to Israel and gained confidence in his loyalty to Gath.

The real test came when the Philistines again prepared to attack Israel in force. Achish demanded that David and his men accompany the Philistine army and promised to make David his personal bodyguard if the expedition succeeded. The other Philistine chieftains did not share Achish's confidence, however, and insisted that David would turn against them during the battle in order to regain Saul's favor. They refused to allow him to fight with them, and Achish was forced to send David and his men back to Ziklag.

When David got back to Ziklag, he found that the Amalekites had raided the town, burned it to the ground, and carried off all its inhabitants as captives. David, after inquiring of the Lord, pursued the Amalekites, despite the fact that a third of his forces were too exhausted to take part in the raid. David and his remaining men then defeated the Amalekites, recovered their families, livestock, and possessions, and took a great deal of plunder besides. After putting down a minor disagreement among his men (those who fought were reluctant to share the plunder with those who had been too tired to continue), David sent parts of the plunder to various Judean cities that had helped or protected his men during their years in hiding. He was clearly preparing for the time when he would be king and would need the support of the towns of Judah.

Meanwhile, Saul had gone to a medium in Endor before the battle to seek out supernatural help from Samuel. When Samuel actually appeared, the medium was more surprised than Saul was. Samuel, however, told Saul that he would die in the battle against the Philistines. In the course of the battle, Saul's three sons were killed and Saul himself was mortally wounded. He asked his armor-bearer to finish him off, but the young man was afraid to do it, so Saul fell on his sword and died. The Philistines then completed the rout and hung the king's decapitated body from the wall of Beth Shan. The way was now clear for David to assume the throne.

APPLICATIONS

Though we have been devoting most of our attention today to David and his activities, the first application we should note comes from the responses of Saul. His behavior toward David illustrates perfectly the attitudes and actions of the person who professes faith in God but does not possess it. Note, first of all, the number of times that Saul invokes the name of God to justify his own behavior (I Samuel 23:7, 21; 24:18-21; 26:21; 28:6, 10) - he is convinced that circumstances that appear to place David in his power are signs of the Lord's favor, he blesses the Ziphites in the Lord's name when they betray David to him, he uses religious language in blessing David for not killing him and making him swear to protect his family, he speaks of repentance when David spares his life a second time, he inquires of the Lord despite the fact that

he had ordered the murder of most of his priests, and he finally swears in God's name to protect the medium he visits! Ungodly people often find it easy to become religious, or at least to use religious language, when circumstances bring them either success (in which case God is on their side) or disaster (in which case they suddenly feel the need to seek God's help). Such language certainly does not fool God, nor should it fool godly observers.

In complete contrast to Saul, David does not allow favorable or unfavorable circumstances to deflect him from his steadfast confidence in the Lord. David recognized that the opportunity to kill Saul did not constitute divine approval for doing so. In an age in which situation ethics reigns supreme, even many Christians mistake opportunity for justification. One of the great dangers in attempting to read the will of God from circumstances is that we will use circumstances to justify as God's will very ungodly behavior that just happens to coincide with our current desires.

Thirdly, we should note that David was a man who consulted God about the mundane matters of life (I Samuel 22:5; 23:2, 4, 9-12; 30:7-8). While we may not have access to the Urim and Thummim, we do have access to the throne of grace. It is also worth noting that David consulted the Lord, then found that, as he obeyed God's commands, God was ordering his circumstances. Unlike Saul, he did not make the mistake of attempting to read God's will *from* his circumstances.

Finally, we should note that, despite his godly demeanor and the dignity with which he carried himself throughout this difficult period of his life, David certainly was not perfect. Many commentators fault him for trying to hide among the Philistines on two occasions, noting that he never consulted God about these decisions. While such a charge is inconclusive, we should notice that, in both circumstances, God providentially delivered him, first from the hand of Achish, and later from the folly of fighting against Israel (which it appears David was fully prepared to do). We have also seen several circumstances under which David lied to protect himself or deceive his enemies - he lied to Ahimelech about his mission when he visited Nob, and he later deceived Achish about the targets of his raids. Though these lies are not specifically condemned in the text, both were clearly wrong, though only the first produced adverse consequences. His sins and failures make David's godly behavior in stressful circumstances an even more helpful example for us - after all, we cannot shrug off his behavior as that of a saint whose level of godliness was beyond our reach.

THE LIFE OF DAVID V

Nabal and Abigail

Last week, we looked at the summary of David's years as a fugitive recounted in I Samuel. There was one incident from those years that we omitted last week, however - the encounter of David with the rich but foolish Nabal and his wise and beautiful wife Abigail (I Samuel 25).

THE CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT

When David and his men were hiding from the wrath of Saul, they encamped in the Judean wilderness. This wild country, honeycombed with caves, was perfect for an outlaw's hideout. It was also suitable for grazing sheep and goats. While the meager soil and vegetation were unsuitable for farming, they were sufficient for sustaining even large flocks. Consequently, many shepherds inhabited the same wilderness where David and his men were living.

Not all of the outlaw bands hiding out in the wilderness were of the benign character of David's men, however. Many were hardened criminals who thought nothing of killing and stealing at their pleasure. As a result, David's men would often occupy themselves by protecting shepherds and their flocks from the marauding bands of robbers who inhabited the region.

The first matter to clarify for your students, therefore, is that David was not running a protection racket. When he sent word to Nabal that nothing had happened to his flocks while David's men were in the area, he was not implying that no harm had come to them from his own people. Instead, he was informing Nabal that he had provided protection from the bandits who infested the region.

Secondly, your class should understand that sheep-shearing time was considered a festive occasion, much like harvest time in agricultural communities. It was common practice for a man to invite all of his neighbors over for a feast when he sheared his sheep. A rich man like Nabal would be expected to throw quite a large party. If hospitality demanded that he invite his neighbors, who in a sense had done nothing for him, how much more would he have been expected to include David and his men, without whose help there would have been no sheep left to shear?

Thus David's expectations were not unreasonable. He was not being pushy or demanding. On the contrary, Nabal's snub was a serious breach of etiquette. Hospitality was considered a serious responsibility in the Middle East three thousand years ago, as it still is today. Had David gone through with his intention to murder Nabal and his men for his insult, few would have blamed him - few, that is, except God.

ABIGAIL TURNS ASIDE DAVID'S WRATH

Though the culture of the day would have approved of David's response, his actions clearly fell far short of God's standard. David ordered his men to put on their swords and swore in the name of God to kill every man in Nabal's household.

One of Nabal's servants got word of David's intentions and informed his mistress. Abigail was obviously a woman whose character far exceeded that of her husband. She recognized that David's request had been reasonable and blanched at the insulting response given by her husband. She immediately took steps to prevent disaster. She gathered some provisions (the list seems rather long, but when one realizes

that David's band consisted of six hundred men, it becomes obvious that the food she brought amounted to little more than a single meal for them) and set out to meet David before he could get to her foolish husband.

Abigail's action was not only brave, it was highly unusual for the society in which she lived. Women rarely spoke to men in public. It took great courage for her to initiate a conversation under such difficult circumstances with a man she had never met. Her abject humility was designed to avoid any charges of brazenness and earned a positive response from David.

We should also note, however, that Abigail was motivated by far more than a desire to save her household from ruin at the hands of her foolish husband (Nabal's name actually means "fool," though it is hard to imagine why any parent would give his child such a name). A careful reading of her words to David indicates that she knew of God's promise to put David on the throne and was convinced that David was carrying out God's purposes. Thus, her response was an act of faith on a deeper level than simple self-preservation.

In any case, Abigail's decisive action accomplished the desired purpose. David recognized that she had been sent by God to preserve him from his sinful vengeance, and he and his men returned home without wreaking carnage on Nabal and his household.

THE JUSTICE OF GOD

By the time Abigail returned home after meeting David, Nabal's feast was almost over and he was feeling no pain. She couldn't even speak to him in the condition into which he had gotten himself, so she waited until morning to tell him what had happened. Whether her story frightened him by opening his eyes to his near brush with death or angered him to think that his wife would countermand one of his orders, he responded so violently to her narrative that he had a heart attack. Ten days later, he died.

When David heard of Nabal's death, he again thanked God for keeping him from taking vengeance and also praised him for giving Nabal what he deserved. He then sent messengers to the newly-widowed Abigail, who obviously had made quite an impression on him, and asked her to be his wife. She quickly agreed and brought her household servants and possessions into David's camp. She thus became David's third wife, though only the second living with him in the wilderness (Ahinoam was already in the camp; Saul's daughter Michal had been given by Saul to another man, though David eventually got her back - obviously Saul did not consider it appropriate to have his daughter married to the man he considered his worst enemy).

APPLICATIONS OF THE STORY

There are a number of possible applications related to this narrative. The first is not a behavioral application, but an interpretive one. This story illustrates beautifully the importance of understanding the historical and cultural background of Scripture. The interaction between David, Nabal, and Abigail would be unintelligible without some knowledge of the customs of the day in which the story took place. It would be quite easy to visualize David as running some sort of Mafia-like protection racket without an understanding of the times.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the story illustrates one of the ways in which God keeps His people from sin. Often, we like to think that we avoid sin because of our noble motives and abhorrence

of anything that would displease God. Yet David, “a man after God’s own heart,” became so angry with Nabal that he was quite prepared to violate a significant number of the Ten Commandments in order to slake his thirst for vengeance. The only reason David did not sin in this case is because God put a circumstantial roadblock in his way in the form of Abigail.

How many times do we avoid sin, not because of our own holy desires, but because God denies us the opportunity? How much more often would we violate the laws of God were the circumstances more advantageous? David’s weakness in the face of temptation is obvious both here, where God prevented him from carrying out his sinful intentions, and in the incident with Bathsheba, where both the temptation and the means for carrying it out were available. If David showed such weakness, how much more is it to be found in each of us? We certainly should remember to give thanks to God for repeatedly putting circumstances in our way that keep us from sinning against Him. When Jesus told His disciples to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” He knew the weakness of our sinful human natures.

Perhaps this is why God rarely entrusts His servants with great power or wealth. If these things were enough to bring down David and Solomon, how easily could they bring us down? We should be thankful to God for not providing any more means or opportunity for sin in our lives than we manage to find on our own.

The third lesson to be gained from this story is that God is a God of justice. While it may not seem that way at times given our short range of vision, God does give both the righteous and the wicked what they deserve. It is certainly true that such justice may not come in this life, but the Word of God assures us that it will come eventually, and in a way that completely vindicates the confidence of God’s people.

THE LIFE OF DAVID VI

David's Early Reign

With the death of Saul and Jonathan in battle against the Philistines, the way was clear for David to become king. As we will see this week, however, that was no easy chore. The incidents associated with David's early reign, including the brief civil war he had to fight in order to secure the throne, are narrated in II Samuel 1-10 and I Chronicles 11-20 and will be the subject of today's lesson (with the exception of David's encounter with Mephibosheth in II Samuel 9, which will be covered next week).

CIVIL WAR (II Samuel 1-4)

Remind your students that, when the Philistines had marched against Saul at Mount Gilboa, David had offered to fight with them but had been refused permission by the lords of the Philistines. Instead, David had defeated the Amalekite raiders who had carried off the families and possessions of his men from Ziklag. It was only after David returned to Ziklag that he received news of the battle of Mount Gilboa, in which the Philistines had routed the army of Israel, and Saul and Jonathan had been killed. The news was brought by an Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul personally (that the man was lying is obvious from the account of I Samuel 31; he was opportunistically trying to gain favor from the heir apparent by claiming to have killed David's long-time rival). If the Amalekite thought David would reward him for his story, he was sadly mistaken, however. In the same way that David had refused to raise his hand against Saul when opportunities had presented themselves in the wilderness, so he refused to take pleasure in the news of his enemy's death. In fact, he believed the Amalekite's report and had him executed as a regicide! David then announced a period of mourning for Saul and Jonathan and wrote a suitable lament to be sung in their memory.

At this time, David was proclaimed king at Hebron by the men of the tribe of Judah, Israel's largest and most populous tribe. The deaths of Saul and Jonathan did not completely pave the way for David to assume the throne, however. Though the king and his eldest son had perished, another son remained - a rather worthless and inept fellow named Ishbosheth (the name means "man of shame," and again one must wonder what his parents had in mind when they gave him such a confidence-building moniker). Abner, the valiant commander of Saul's army, regrouped the soldiers who remained and proclaimed Ishbosheth king over Israel; Saul's son was then recognized as king by all the tribes other than Judah, though there were many within these tribes who favored David, either openly or covertly.

The existence of rival kings inevitably leads to war, and it didn't take long before fighting broke out between the men of David and those of Ishbosheth. Joab, the commander of David's troops, was a violent man who never seemed to be happy unless he was involved in a battle. He and Abner were in some ways kindred spirits, so it should be no surprise to find that each took a large band of men and went out in search of the other. The two bands met at the pool of Gibeon, and Abner suggested a little pleasant sport to while away the time - a dozen young warriors from each side to face off in individual hand-to-hand combat. Joab readily agreed, and the games began. The result was a bit different from what everyone anticipated - a draw, with each of the combatants killing and being killed by his opponent. Tempers flared on both sides, and what had begun as "sport" soon flared into pitched battle. Joab's men got the better of things and chased Abner and his men from the field. Though Abner lost 360 men and Joab lost only twenty in the day's fighting, one of the dead was Joab's brother Asahel, killed by Abner himself. Joab never forgot this day and never forgave the Israelite commander for killing his brother.

As time passed, more and more Israelites defected to David's side. It was obvious to all that David was God's chosen ruler and that Ishbosheth was an inept fool. The final straw came when Ishbosheth accused Abner of sleeping with one of Saul's concubines (a very serious offense, since possession of the king's harem was considered a sign of succession). Abner, insulted by Ishbosheth's false accusation, defected to David's side. David received him willingly, asking only that Abner retrieve for him Michal the daughter of Saul, who had been betrothed to him, but later married by Saul to another man. Abner met with David to make arrangements for the defection and promised to bring all Israel into David's camp.

Joab was not present at the meeting, however. When he found out that David was negotiating with Abner, he was furious, and told David that Abner was not to be trusted and was merely spying out the camp in order to defeat David more easily. Joab then sent messengers after Abner and asked him to return. He asked to speak with him privately, and after drawing him aside into a dark alley, he murdered him to avenge the death of his brother Asahel.

The death of Abner doomed Ishbosheth's abortive attempt to retain his father's throne. Shortly thereafter, Ishbosheth was murdered by two of his own commanders. They cut off the head of their former king and brought it to David, hoping for a reward. Like the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul, however, their only reward was the separation of their heads from their bodies by the order of David himself. The death of Ishbosheth ended the civil war, and David was proclaimed king over all Israel.

WORSHIP OF GOD ESTABLISHED (II Samuel 6; I Chronicles 13,15-16)

During the civil war, David had made his capital at Hebron in Judah, but after being recognized as king of all Israel, he wanted to establish his capital in the region between the rival factions of Judah in the south and Israel in the north (the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon did not represent new loyalties, but merely the renewal of old regional jealousies). In order to do this, he conquered the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, in the central mountains between the tribal territories of Judah and Benjamin, and established it as his new capital city.

Having done this, he wanted to make it the center of worship as well as the administrative capital, so he determined to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the city from its present location in the house of Abinadab in Judah. Accompanied by priests and soldiers, the Ark was placed on a cart, guarded by Ahio and Uzzah, the sons of Abinadab. The oxen pulling the cart stumbled in a pothole, and the Ark almost fell off the cart. Uzzah reached out to steady it, but was immediately struck dead by God, since it was not permitted for anyone to touch the sacred Ark with the exception of the priests under certain circumstances. The death of Uzzah frightened David so much that he refused to transport the Ark into Jerusalem, but left it at the home of Obed-Edom (interestingly, Obed-Edom was a Gittite, from the Philistine city of Gath; whether or not he himself was a Philistine, he apparently had befriended David during his time in exile among the Philistines). Despite David's fears, God blessed Obed-Edom during the three months the Ark resided in his house.

After seeing the blessing that came to Obed-Edom and his family, David gained sufficient courage to finish bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. He mounted a large-scale procession, complete with priests, sacrifices, and an honor guard of his best soldiers, with himself at the head, dancing and praising God as the symbol of His presence was transported into the new capital. The only sour aspect of the celebration was the criticism of David's wife Michal, who thought David was acting like a fool, humiliating himself in front of every slave girl who came out to watch the parade. Michal, who obviously was a woman who had little

appreciation for the intensity of David's devotion to God, was punished by the Lord with childlessness from that day forward.

GOD'S COVENANT WITH DAVID (II Samuel 7; I Chronicles 17)

Hiram, the king of Tyre, which lay to the northwest of Israel, made an alliance with David, and as part of the bargain sent materials and craftsmen to build a palace for the king. While David appreciated his new home, which was quite a contrast to the tents and caves in which he had slept for so long, it soon came to his attention that the Ark of the Covenant remained in a tent while he slept in a palace. David therefore wanted to build a Temple to house the Ark.

God, however, refused to give him permission to do so, but responded to David's pious desire by telling him that He would build for David a house - not a palace of wood and stone, but an everlasting kingdom over which his descendants would rule. This declaration on the part of God is known as the Davidic Covenant and was fulfilled, not in an unending line of kings coming from the family of David, but in one King from his family who was to rule forever - Jesus the Messiah.

DAVID DEFEATS HIS ENEMIES (II Samuel 5,8,10; I Chronicles 11,14,18-20)

The early years of David's reign were ones of almost constant warfare. Once the civil war with the family of Saul was brought to its conclusion, there remained the surrounding tribes with whom David had to deal. The most powerful of these was the Philistines, who had defeated Saul at Mount Gilboa and remained the strongest group in the region. In addition to the Philistines, there were also the Moabites and Ammonites on the east, the Edomites in the south, the nomadic Amalekites, and the Arameans in the northeast. David subjugated each of these in turn, either directly incorporating their territory into Israel or else gaining their submission as tributaries to Israel.

In the process, he did what every self-respecting and politically astute king of his day did - he accumulated wives to cement the various political alliances he made. This common though ungodly practice not only guaranteed that he would have no peace in the latter part of his reign (as we will see, the rivalries among the sons of his various wives led to a great deal of trouble), but it also set a terrible example that was later taken to extremes by his son and successor Solomon, who in his lifetime accumulated no fewer than seven hundred wives and three hundred slave-concubines.

APPLICATIONS OF THE PASSAGE

It is not easy for us to accept some of the practices in which David engaged in the course of his various wars, such as the execution of two-thirds of the captured Moabite soldiers and the hamstringing of nine hundred warhorses (II Samuel 8:2-4). Yet we must take note of the fact that David showed a nobility far beyond the typical savagery of the day. He honored bravery even among his enemies (such as in his treatment of Abner), and he punished treachery even when it benefitted him personally (such as in the cases of the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul and the murderers of Ishbosheth). While we cannot defend or agree with everything David did in securing his kingdom, we must recognize the condition of his heart. In every step he took, he sought to honor God and obey Him. Even if all of David's actions may not be models worthy of emulation, the attitude of his heart certainly is.

On the other hand, the foolishness of David's actions in making marriage alliances with pagan rulers caused nothing but trouble. He stirred up problems in his own house, left a legacy of trouble for his son Solomon, and established a precedent that eventually contributed to the decline of the nation into idolatry. The serious consequences of adopting unquestioningly the practices commonly accepted in the world cannot be emphasized enough. How often do we today accept without question the practices of the world, never realizing the serious consequences of such practices for ourselves and those who come after us?

The main application of the lesson, however, is that God keeps His promises. David was patient in waiting for God's time to take the throne, and God rewarded his patience by making him undisputed king of Israel. Today's passage not only shows us the fulfillment of a long-standing promise, however, but also the making of a promise that was fulfilled many centuries later. In the Davidic Covenant, God promised an everlasting throne to the house of David. Though his descendants sat on the throne for almost four hundred years after his death, the Davidic line eventually fell from power. It was not until almost a thousand years after David's death that God fulfilled His promise, bringing from the line of David a Son who would rule over God's people forever.

THE LIFE OF DAVID VII

David and Mephibosheth

We saw last week that David was in some ways like the other kings of his day, slaughtering his enemies and forming numerous political alliances through marriage. Yet we noted at the same time that there was something about him that set him apart from the other monarchs of his day and earned him the description, “a man after God’s own heart.” If David revealed his heart by honoring Abner and swiftly executing those who thought to gain his favor by murdering his enemies, he did so even more in the account before us today. The story of Mephibosheth, recorded in II Samuel 9, gives us insight into the heart of David like nothing in Scripture outside the book of Psalms.

MEPHIBOSHETH’S CONDITION

Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan and was lame in both feet. II Samuel 4:4 tells us how that came about (the verse is rather peculiar - a parenthetical insertion into the middle of the story of the assassination of Ishbosheth; it seems that the writer wanted to provide the information needed to understand the story of David’s compassion, but it almost slipped his mind and he inserted it in the middle of another account). Apparently Mephibosheth was five years old when his father Jonathan was killed at the battle of Mount Gilboa, and when his nurse heard the news of Israel’s defeat and Jonathan’s death, she fled to protect the life of the child. She knew that no member of the royal family was safe with Saul dead. If the Philistines did not kill the child, she suspected that David’s men would do so (it was common practice in those days for one who ascended the throne to remove the possibility of civil war by killing every member of the previous king’s family). In her haste, she dropped the child, and he sustained injuries to both feet that made him a lifelong cripple.

After his family fell from power, the child was taken away, probably to stay with more distant relatives. His inability to walk made it impossible for him to support himself, so he was dependent on others to care for him. This was Mephibosheth’s condition when David inquired about the remnants of the former ruling family. Since the narrative takes place in Jerusalem, we know that David was at least seven and a half years into his reign. Consequently, Mephibosheth must have been at least thirteen, and may well have been in his early twenties (this is likely, since II Samuel 9:12 says that Mephibosheth by this time had a young son).

DAVID’S RESPONSE

As we have already seen, David did not take the typical approach of most eleventh-century B.C. monarchs in his dealings with Saul and his family. Not only did he spare Saul’s life on several occasions, but he befriended Saul’s son Jonathan, executed the man who claimed to have killed Saul, and ordered the deaths of the murderers of Ishbosheth. He now demonstrated the sincerity of these previous actions by showing kindness when no one could possibly have compelled it, and doing so to one in whom he would have had no natural interest.

While David had promised Jonathan that he would protect Jonathan’s family (I Samuel 20:15,42), Jonathan was now dead, and no one besides David himself knew of the promise. David had fought a costly civil war against the family of Saul (in the person of Ishbosheth), and had few reasons to think kindly of his predecessor’s relatives. Unlike Ishbosheth, Mephibosheth was no threat to David’s throne. He was clearly

incapable of exercising rule in an era when monarchy was a physically demanding job. In fact, he was so far from being a threat that David was not even aware of his existence.

David was determined to fulfill his promise to Jonathan, however. Once his kingdom was firmly and securely established, he sought out a long-time servant of Saul's household named Ziba. From Ziba he learned that only one member of Saul's family still survived - Jonathan's son Mephibosheth. David immediately sent for the young man and had him brought to Jerusalem. Mephibosheth must have been both confused and frightened. He had no idea why David might have summoned him to the palace, and, being the only survivor of the previous royal family, he feared the worst.

David immediately allayed his fears, however, and announced that he intended to show kindness to Mephibosheth because of his friendship for the young man's father. The king told Mephibosheth that he intended to restore the lands that had formerly belonged to Saul and gave him a permanent place at the royal table. Mephibosheth would no longer have to depend on the charity of relatives. Now he would have his own lands and servants to provide needed income, and he would enjoy a place of honor in the royal palace.

APPLICATIONS OF THE PASSAGE

Periodically, those of us who would under normal circumstances eschew allegorical interpretation in all its forms fall prey to the temptation to overuse the biblical concept of typology. While the Bible does indicate that certain characters are intended to be types of Christ (Melchizedek comes immediately to mind), it is tempting to read into certain other characters and stories applications concerning the work of Christ. Joseph and Ruth are ones with whom this is frequently done. This story of Mephibosheth is another.

It is really quite easy to see in this little story a picture of the saving work of Christ, the great Son of David. Ask your students to pick out as many analogies as they can find. Their responses should include the following:

- Mephibosheth was, according to the standards of the day, deserving of death because he belonged to the previous royal family.
- Mephibosheth was an enemy of David because he belonged to a rival royal family.
- Mephibosheth was helpless, unable even to sustain his life without the help of others.
- David reached out to Mephibosheth for the sake of a covenant to which he had earlier agreed.
- David took the initiative to find Mephibosheth and bring him to himself.
- David made Mephibosheth like a member of his family.
- David provided for all of Mephibosheth's needs.

Having noted these, however, be sure to point out to your students that, while the story may illustrate these principles that are pertinent to the saving work of Christ, these things are not legitimately part of the interpretation of the passage. These truths may be part of the possible application of the story of Mephibosheth, but we should never make the mistake of thinking that the story of Mephibosheth was given because of the analogies it provides to the saving work of Christ.

In addition to the frequently-cited theological application of the story, we should note that it also has a moral application. The love that God requires of His people is love that looks in the direction of those to whom we are not naturally attracted, those who are unable to help themselves. Such love requires aggressiveness on the part of God's children. David did not wait for Mephibosheth to come to him. This

love is also costly - David committed himself to support Mephibosheth for the rest of his life (as we will see later, that commitment held firm even in the midst of a later civil war in which David found himself embroiled, and one in which Mephibosheth appeared for a while to have taken sides against his long-time benefactor). If we are to be children of our Father in heaven, we must show the same kind of love that Jesus speaks about in the Sermon on the Mount.

THE LIFE OF DAVID VIII

David and Bathsheba

The characters of the Bible are not superheroes. For every story of David and Goliath, there is another of David and Bathsheba. The fact that David was “a man after God’s own heart” does not mean that he was without sin, or that he was beyond the reach of temptation. As we will see in our study of II Samuel 11-12 today, David committed terrible sins. Yet even in his sins, David provides a useful example for us.

TEMPTATION AND FALL

The phrase with which II Samuel 11 begins gives us an interesting insight into an era very much unlike our own. In the eleventh century B.C., climate and the agricultural cycle dictated seasons of war. The spring, after good weather had arrived and the spring planting had been completed, was one such season. Farmers had little to do until the time of harvest, so it was a good time for war.

David by this time had become firmly established on his throne and no longer felt the need to lead his troops personally when they went out on their seasonal excursions to keep the peace or put down revolts in the conquered territories. Joab, David’s commander, led the men into battle, and they succeeded in subduing the Ammonites, then lay siege to Rabbah, the Ammonite capital city. David, however, was restless. He was not used to being at home while his armies were in the fields. One night he had trouble sleeping, so he went up to the rooftop of his palace to get some fresh air. His palace was undoubtedly the tallest building in Jerusalem, and from his roof he commanded a view of the tops of all the smaller buildings in the vicinity. As it turned out, he was not the only one having trouble sleeping. Bathsheba, the beautiful young wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David’s bravest soldiers, had chosen that time of night to bathe on her rooftop, presumably believing that no one would be up at that hour to observe her ablutions. When David spotted her, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. Very quickly, he arrived at the point where looking was not enough. The power of a king is dangerous because it places few barriers between desire and fulfillment. David had the power to turn his lust into reality and quickly moved to do so. He sent a messenger to find out the identity of the beautiful creature he had seen. His discovery that she was the wife of Uriah did not deter him; he quickly sent messengers to bring her to the palace. It is impossible to discern from the text how Bathsheba felt about all of this, but unquestionably the culture of the day made it virtually impossible for her to refuse David’s advances. After all, he was the king. David satiated his lust, then sent her back to her own house, probably assuming the incident was over. But he found otherwise a few months later when Bathsheba reported to him that she was pregnant.

COVER-UP

Succumbing to temptation is one thing, but having one’s weakness revealed to the entire world is quite another. Like Richard Nixon in a similar situation, what really bothered David was the idea of getting caught with his hands in the cookie jar. This may not have been Watergate, but David immediately took steps to institute a cover-up.

The obvious first step was to make Uriah think that the child was his. A little thought reveals that this strategy was not as shrewd as it appeared to be. By the time Bathsheba discovered that she was pregnant, she was probably at least six weeks into her pregnancy. It would have taken several more days to bring Uriah home from the field. Even in those days, people could count, and it is highly unlikely that Uriah would have

been fooled had his wife delivered a strong, healthy baby seven months after any possible precipitating activity on his part.

In any case, David's strategy failed. Uriah came to the palace and reported on the progress of the fighting, but when David dismissed him, he refused to go home. His nobility in this situation stands out in sad contrast to the duplicity of David himself. Uriah argued that he would not think of enjoying his own home, bed, and wife while his comrades in arms were sleeping on the ground outside of Rabbah. David tried once more, this time after getting Uriah thoroughly drunk, but the captain still insisted on sleeping in the courtyard of the palace. It became obvious that David would not be able to conceal his sin by pretending that Uriah was the father of the child being carried by Bathsheba.

By this time David was desperate and used Uriah as the bearer of his own death sentence. He sent a message to Joab to engage the men of Rabbah in close combat, using Uriah as the leader of the attacking force. Then, once Uriah was exposed near the walls of the city, Joab was to sound a retreat. Joab immediately recognized the foolishness of the plan. A siege succeeds only by out-waiting the enemy, depriving them of provisions until they either starve or surrender. It makes no sense at all to get close enough to the city walls for the defenders to have a decent shot at one's men. Joab, however, was not one to quibble about the shedding of blood, and if David wanted Uriah dead, Joab was willing to accommodate him. The deed was done, Uriah was killed, and Joab sent word back to David in Jerusalem. Joab even felt it necessary to defend the utterly stupid strategy that had almost led to the breaking of the siege by reminding David that he had ordered the strategy personally. David got the message, and his response to the defeat that cost him one of his best captains must have been, to any ignorant observer, amazingly nonchalant.

At this point, David was confident that his cover-up had succeeded. After a decent interval of mourning (which must have been rather brief), David took Bathsheba into the palace and made her his wife. The child could then be born in the privacy of the palace, and no one outside the royal household would be any the wiser.

REBUKE AND REPENTANCE

It appears that David forgot one minor detail. He may have succeeded in keeping the knowledge of his sin from his subjects, but he could not hide his sin from God.

One day, after the birth of the child, Nathan the prophet appeared in the royal court. He told David a story about a wealthy man who stole the beloved lamb of his poor neighbor in order to butcher it and feed it to a passing stranger. David was incensed at the heartlessness of the rich man and decreed that such a callous soul deserved to die. Nathan then pointed out that David himself was the guilty party. At this point in the narrative, David again revealed his true character. His immediate response was one of repentance - not simply because he had been caught, but because he realized the magnitude of his offense against God.

CONSEQUENCES

Sin may be forgiven, but the earthly consequences of that sin continue to play themselves out in the lives of those who violate God's law. In David's case, there were a number of consequences that flowed from his sins of adultery and murder.

First of all, God decreed that the child born of the adulterous union would die. Shortly thereafter, the boy became ill, and David prostrated himself before God in fasting and prayer, begging for God to spare the life of the child. A week later the child died, and David ended his fast, cleansed himself, and went to worship God. Though David had sought God's grace for the child in vain, he knew that it was now time to get back to the business of ruling his kingdom.

The other consequences of David's sin were not immediate. Nathan warned him that, as a result of his sin, he would be cursed with constant turmoil in his family until the day of his death. In particular, Nathan told David that one of his family members would sleep with David's wives in the sight of all Israel - committing in public an act that David had tried to get away with in secret. Next week, we will see how those prophecies were fulfilled in the rebellion of Absalom.

II Samuel 12 ends peacefully, with an aura of "business as usual." David and Bathsheba have another son - the great Solomon, who was to succeed his father on the throne. In addition, Joab finally wins the war with the Ammonites, though he somewhat ironically calls David away from Jerusalem to finish them off, and thus gain personal credit for the victory that he almost undermined in his desire to rid himself of the inconvenient and unfortunate Uriah. The peace, however, was short-lived, as David soon felt the long-range consequences of his night of lustful desire.

APPLICATIONS OF THE STORY

Many lessons may be learned from this famous biblical narrative. The first is that no one is above the power of temptation. David was at the height of his power. He had everything God had promised him. Yet the very power that had come with the stability of his throne became a snare, as he abused it to satisfy his lust. As Paul warned his readers in I Corinthians 10:12, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

Secondly, we should note that sin rarely occurs in isolation. When one of God's children sins, feelings of guilt and shame are normal. If the Christian does not respond to those feelings with true repentance, he will then be tempted to cover up the sin. This may not assuage his feelings, but it at least prevents public embarrassment. As David's cover-up attempt demonstrates, however, sin has a way of revealing itself despite our best efforts. All David succeeded in doing was compounding his original sin of adultery by adding to it the sin of murder. Thus his experience teaches us that, when we do sin, we should repent immediately in order to avoid compounding the sin with further offenses.

Thirdly, the story of David and Bathsheba teaches us that sin brings suffering to those who were not involved in the sinful behavior. Have the class make a list of those who suffered as a result of David's sin. Aside from the question of Bathsheba's culpability, we can certainly list Uriah, the child produced by the adulterous relationship, the other men who were killed at Rabbah as a result of David's foolish strategy, the soldiers who survived the battle but saw it prolonged unreasonably when the defenders almost broke the siege, and the citizens of Israel who had to suffer through another civil war when Absalom later rose up against his father. The sin we commit never affects only ourselves. There is no such thing as private sin.

Fourthly, as we have already noted, forgiveness of sin does not remove the consequences of that sin. Those who do repent receive forgiveness from God, but that does not mean that the consequences of the sin that was committed are eliminated. David suffered the loss of his son as well as suffering perpetual conflict within his own family for the rest of his days. Forgiveness is not cheap grace. We need to realize that, when

we sin against God, we are bringing upon ourselves as well as others the suffering associated with that sin, whether repentance is forthcoming or not.

Finally, this story teaches us that sin does not disqualify a person from the service of God. While it is true that David suffered greatly as a result of his sin, God did not cast him aside, but rather continued to use him in His service. When Christians sin, they should not think that God has eliminated them from all usefulness in His kingdom. God can repair broken vessels, and those vessels may continue to be used, despite the continuing pain of the cracks in the pottery.

THE LIFE OF DAVID IX

Absalom's Rebellion

We saw last week that God had told David through the prophet Nathan that one of the consequences of his sin would be family turmoil and violence. This week, we will see how that prophecy came to pass in the events surrounding the rebellion of David's son Absalom. These events are recorded in II Samuel 13-20.

THE RAPE OF TAMAR

David obviously had not set a sterling example of sexual morality for his children, nor had he shown perfect restraint in the use and control of his royal powers, though admittedly he was far better than most. In II Samuel 13, we see that David's son Amnon saw only the negative aspects of his father's example. He fell madly in love with his half-sister Tamar, the sister of his half-brother Absalom. He spent his time mooning about like a sick puppy, able to think of nothing but this beautiful girl.

His cousin Jonadab suggested a way that he could satisfy his lust, and Amnon agreed to follow the plan. Amnon feigned illness and asked David to send Tamar to nurse him and prepare his food. When Tamar came to his house, Amnon sent everyone else away and invited Tamar into his bedroom to feed him his dinner. When she came into the room, Amnon seized her and demanded that she lie with him. Tamar resisted, arguing that such a deed would shame them both and protesting that they should instead ask David for permission to marry. Amnon, however, had no intention of waiting for David's permission - his hormones were crying out for immediate satisfaction. He overpowered Tamar and raped her, then sent her away in disgust. She went in disgrace to the home of her brother Absalom. When David heard what had happened, he fumed and raged, but did nothing.

ABSALOM'S REVENGE AND EXILE

Absalom, meanwhile, was plotting his revenge. He said nothing to Amnon, giving his enemy no warning that he even knew what had happened to his sister. Finally, two years later, he put his plan into action. Absalom organized a feast at sheep-shearing time (as we saw in the account of David and Nabal, this was common practice). He invited David and the rest of the royal family to come to the feast. David declined, but agreed to send his sons and their families. This was exactly what Absalom wanted. He waited until all the guests had eaten and drunk their fill, then ordered his servants to murder Amnon. The rest of David's sons fled in terror, thinking that Absalom meant to murder all of them and assure the royal succession for himself.

By the time word reached Jerusalem the message had been distorted, and David was told that all of his other sons had been murdered by Absalom. He immediately went into mourning, but his nephew Jonadab, who seems to have had better insight into the character of David's sons than David did (though he himself seems to have had precious little character to speak of), assured the king that only Amnon was dead. When the king's sons came straggling over the hill shortly thereafter, Jonadab's hunch was confirmed.

Amnon had been the heir to the throne. Such a murder could not be overlooked. As a result, Absalom fled and spent the next three years in exile in the kingdom of Geshur.

ABSALOM'S RETURN AND CONSPIRACY

David was not a good father. He loved his sons dearly, but seemed incapable of disciplining them. Once he got over the death of Amnon, he longed for his son Absalom. Yet how could he justify bringing a man who had murdered the future king back from exile as if nothing had happened?

Joab, an old pragmatist who rarely let questions of right and wrong intrude on his decisions, took steps to prompt the king in the direction his heart wanted to go. He devised an elaborate ruse, using an elderly woman from Tekoa. The old woman petitioned David to pardon her son, who had killed his brother. David agreed, but then the woman turned to him and asked him why he would not then pardon his own son Absalom. David immediately recognized that Joab had set him up, but agreed to bring Absalom back. All he really needed was an excuse to do what he really wanted to do anyway.

Unlike Joab, David had a conscience, and still did not feel right about giving Absalom a full pardon. He was torn between the desire to restore his son and the need to maintain justice in his kingdom. Consequently, he tried to compromise between his two urges. He sent Joab to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem, but refused to allow him to set foot in the palace. The young man was thus no longer a criminal, but had not been restored to his full position as a member of the king's family.

This uncomfortable situation went on for another two years. Finally, Absalom got tired of waiting and took steps to get himself back into his father's good graces. He first tried to arrange a meeting with Joab, but the old soldier refused to meet with him. Absalom then casually ordered his servants to burn one of Joab's barley fields - a tactic along the lines of hitting a mule upside the head with a two-by-four in order to get its attention. When an enraged Joab stormed into Absalom's house demanding an explanation, Absalom coolly informed him that he had been trying to contact him for quite some time, but Joab had refused to respond. Absalom then asked Joab to get him an audience with the king. David agreed to Joab's request and saw his son for the first time in five years. The two were reconciled, and David accepted Absalom back into the royal family.

Absalom continued to harbor bitterness against his father, however, and began plotting to seize the throne. He began by ingratiating himself with the general population. He would loiter daily outside the city gate, speaking to people who had come to petition the king. He treated each one like a brother, sympathized with his troubles, and assured him that, if he were king, he would surely give him what he wanted. Pressing the flesh and kissing babies never worked better.

After four years of this sort of thing, Absalom had become quite a popular figure. His campaign promises and attractive appearance won over the common people. When the time was right, he asked David for permission to go to Hebron to fulfill a vow to the Lord (Isn't it interesting how often religion is used for the convenience of those who have political ambitions?). Meanwhile, he sent word throughout the twelve tribes to prepare to make him king when he gave the signal. At the same time, he gathered two hundred supporters from Jerusalem and enlisted the aid of Ahithophel, David's wisest counselor, and, not coincidentally, the grandfather of Bathsheba (II Samuel 11:3 cf. 23:34).

ABSALOM SEIZES THE THRONE

When David got word of the conspiracy, he realized that he was in a vulnerable position and he and his supporters fled in disarray from Jerusalem. Even as he fled, however, he made preparations to maintain

control of the kingdom in the face of his son's attempted coup. He insisted that the priests, Zadok and Abiathar, remain in Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant. There, they could gather intelligence and send word to him through their sons, Ahimaaz and Jonathan. In addition, he planted a mole in the hierarchy of his son's budding kingdom - his advisor, Hushai the Arkite. David instructed Hushai to pretend to defect, as Ahithophel had done, and to do all that he could to undermine the strategy behind the coup.

On the way out of Jerusalem, David had to deal with a variety of responses from his subjects. Ziba, the servant of Saul who had been given the responsibility of working the fields belonging to Mephibosheth, reported that his master had sided with Absalom, hoping to regain his grandfather's kingdom. David, understandably indignant, gave all of Mephibosheth's possessions to Ziba and his family (as we will see later, this was exactly what Ziba had in mind). In addition, David was confronted by an old man named Shimei, who let loose years of pent-up frustration in a tirade of curses accompanied with a shower of dirt and rocks rained down upon the head of the fleeing king. At this point, David was so depressed that he suspected that Shimei might be right and refused to let his followers retaliate. David did have his faithful supporters, however, including Joab and a significant portion of the army, and wealthy landowners such as Barzillai, who provided supplies for David's tired and hungry men.

Meanwhile, David's spy network in Jerusalem was working beautifully. While Ahithophel initially gained Absalom's ear with his advice that the young man proclaim publicly his intentions by sleeping with David's concubines in the sight of all Israel (another fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy), Hushai soon overcame the old man's counsel. Absalom needed to decide how to go about eliminating his father for good. Ahithophel advised that he strike immediately, while David's forces were tired and demoralized and the Jordan River blocked their retreat. He argued that the kingdom could be secured by capturing and killing David himself. Hushai countered by suggesting more thorough preparation, followed by an all-out attack that would completely destroy the forces loyal to David. Absalom favored Hushai's advice and began to make preparations. Ahithophel, meanwhile, recognizing the folly of Absalom's course and knowing that he was doomed if David regained his throne, went home and hanged himself.

ABSALOM'S DEFEAT AND DEATH

Ahimaaz and Jonathan, the sons of the priests, quickly went to warn David of the need to cross the Jordan and fortify his position. The two young men escaped Absalom's agents by hiding at the bottom of a well, but got word to David in plenty of time for him to make preparations for Absalom's assault.

David organized his men into three divisions and deployed them for the attack he knew was certain to come. When Absalom's men arrived, David's troops were ready for them and routed them in the forests of Ephraim. Though David had given word to his commanders that Absalom's life was to be spared, Joab ran him through with three spears after the young man had gotten his head caught in the low-hanging branches of an oak tree. The rebellion was over almost as quickly as it had begun.

DAVID'S RETURN TO JERUSALEM

David went into mourning for yet another dead son (his third, counting the young boy born to Bathsheba), but Joab told him to snap out of it and provide some leadership for his still-divided kingdom. David rallied his supporters and prepared to return to Jerusalem. He made peace with the supporters of Absalom by naming Absalom's commander, Amasa, to replace Joab, who had violated his orders by killing the rebellious heir. He forgave Shimei, who had cursed him on his way out of the city. Mephibosheth also

came out to meet the king as he prepared to enter Jerusalem. The lame son of Jonathan insisted that he had never intended to take the side of Absalom and that Ziba had lied about him in order to gain his land. David knew that it was the word of one man against the other and that there was really no way of knowing the truth, so he divided the land between Mephibosheth and Ziba. Mephibosheth showed his true loyalties, however, when he declined to accept any of the land and settled for returning to his place in David's court. David also offered the elderly Barzillai, who had faithfully supported his followers in the wilderness, a place in court, but Barzillai declined, protesting that he was too old to leave home and resettle in Jerusalem.

SHEBA'S REBELLION

Even as David crossed triumphantly over the Jordan on his way back to Jerusalem, however, trouble broke out anew between the men of Israel and the men of Judah. This rivalry was of long standing and would eventually lead to the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon. After an exchange of harsh words, an Ephraimite troublemaker by the name of Sheba, the son of Bicri, rallied the men of Israel to renounce the leadership of David and follow him. Many did, and as a result David faced yet another revolt against his monarchy. After getting settled in Jerusalem, David called upon his new commander, Amasa, to put down Sheba's rebellion. Amasa was slow to get started, however, so David sent out a force under the command of Abishai, Joab's brother. He and his men then pursued Sheba. When Amasa finally arrived, Joab, determined to regain his command, murdered him in cold blood by driving a dagger into his ribs while pretending to greet him in friendship. Joab and Abishai then continued the pursuit of Sheba, finally surrounding his forces inside the town of Abel Beth Maacah. As they prepared to lay siege to the town, a woman from the town objected to their efforts to destroy it. Joab told her about Sheba's revolt. She then promised to settle the matter and convinced the people of the town to kill Sheba themselves. When they had done so, they threw his head over the city walls to Joab and the siege was lifted.

APPLICATIONS OF THE STORY

While the story of Absalom's revolt is interesting, it has very little in the way of direct spiritual application. Certainly it demonstrates the truths about the consequences of sin that we talked about last week, and it also shows that God keeps His promises - David kept the throne that God had promised to him and his family forever, but that throne continued to be bathed in the blood of David's children.

A few applications may be drawn from minor aspects of the story, however. First of all, we find prayer accompanied by strategy playing a major role in thwarting Absalom's revolt. David first prayed that God would turn Ahithophel's counsel to foolishness, then plotted to accomplish that end by planting Hushai in Absalom's court. David knew that God would answer prayer, but also knew that sitting back and doing nothing was not the proper accompaniment to his prayers.

Secondly, David may be a fine example of a king, but he is a poor example of a father. Your students should easily be able to pick up a variety of ways in which David failed his sons by giving them everything they wanted while denying them the discipline they needed. He also shows that a father's failings can loom large in the eyes of his children, no matter how large the number of his successes may be.

THE LIFE OF DAVID X

David's Final Years

As Nathan had earlier prophesied, David saw trouble to the end of his days, particularly within his own family. Yet he also lived to see two important promises of God fulfilled - the preparations for the construction of the Temple and the safe establishment of Solomon on the throne. The incidents covered in this lesson are recorded in II Samuel 21-24, I Kings 1-2, and I Chronicles 21-29.

A FAMINE, ITS AFTERMATH, AND A FEW MINOR SKIRMISHES

After Absalom's rebellion had been put down, a famine struck the land of Israel. After three years of poor crops, starvation, and disease, David inquired of the Lord about the reason for the famine. God indicated to David that the famine was punishment for the brutal treatment of the Gibeonites at the time of Saul. David summoned representatives of the Gibeonites and asked what they wanted him to do to make amends for the mistreatment they had received at the hands of Saul. They asked that they be given seven male descendants of Saul to execute. David agreed and handed over to them seven of Saul's grandsons, whom they killed and "exposed before the Lord." Thus the famine came to an end.

This account is one of those incidents in Scripture that drives Christians in general and Bible scholars in particular to distraction. To begin with, the mistreatment of the Gibeonites that is said to have caused the famine is mentioned nowhere in Scripture. Secondly, the idea that God would get around to punishing Israel with a famine about thirty years after the injustice had been done seems peculiar. In the third place, the "justice" that was done hardly seems fair to our way of thinking - after all, Saul's grandsons had done nothing to deserve death.

Our only response to an incident like this is to acknowledge that God's sense of timing is beyond our reasoning, and the culture of Israel three thousand years ago is not like that of modern America. To God, a punishment delivered thirty years after the offense is not unusual. And to the men of Israel in David's time, the notion of corporate (in particular, family) responsibility was generally accepted as valid (note, for instance, the number of times where an entire family suffers for the deeds of one of its members, or where all of Israel suffers for the sins of one man).

II Samuel 21 also records a number of minor skirmishes with the Philistines, who, though subdued, continued to cause trouble periodically. It seems that the major source of the problem was Goliath's family, who continued to hold a grudge against David. Goliath was not the only member of the family who possessed unusual size and physical prowess. Not until the entire family was eliminated by various Israelite mighty men did the Philistines stop stirring things up.

COUNTING THE TROOPS

II Samuel 24 and I Chronicles 21 both record David's sin in taking a census of his fighting men. One is immediately struck by the contrast found in the opening verses of the two accounts. While II Samuel speaks of the Lord as stirring up David to number the troops because of his anger against Israel, I Chronicles says that Satan moved David to sin in this way. The truth, I suspect, is somewhat like the picture given to us in the first chapter of the book of Job. Satan served as the tempter, but he could act only within the permission granted by God, and God had his own reasons for allowing Satan to move David to commit this sin.

Why was counting the troops considered to be such a grievous sin that even the hard-nosed, pragmatic Joab immediately recognized that it was a mistake? Kings of the day gained security from the size of their armies - the more fighting men they had, the more invincible they felt. But the king of Israel was to be different. His strength came from the Lord, not from the size of his army. When David set out to number the troops, he clearly forgot where his strength lay. He was trusting in men rather than trusting in God.

After the census (which revealed that his kingdom had 1300 clans or troops of fighting men; the word often translated *thousand* can also have these meanings) was completed, God sent Gad the prophet to rebuke David. David acknowledged his sin, and Gad told him that God had offered a choice of three punishments. God would either send him three years of famine, three months of military losses at the hands of his enemies, or three days of plague from the Lord. David chose to place himself in the hands of God rather than those of man, and the plague began. In three days, seventy Israelite clans were wiped out. The plague ended just before the Angel of Death reached Jerusalem. At that point, David offered sacrifices to God, and the angel sheathed his sword. In order to offer sacrifices, David purchased the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Though Araunah offered to give him the land, David refused to offer something to God that had cost him nothing.

PREPARATIONS FOR BUILDING THE TEMPLE

The land that David had purchased from Araunah became the site of the proposed Temple. Though David had been told by God that he could not build the Temple because he had been a “man of blood” all his days, he nonetheless did all he could to prepare for its construction during the reign of his son Solomon. He drew up plans, collected contributions, gathered materials, and organized the workers who would be needed to do the job. By the time Solomon ascended the throne, all was ready for the work on the Temple to begin. These preparations are detailed in I Chronicles 22-29.

ADONIJAH USURPS THE THRONE

Despite the fact that David was near death, his family problems were not yet over. As he fell into his last sickness, so weak that a young virgin named Abishag had to be summoned to care for him and keep him warm in his bed, David’s oldest remaining son (now that Amnon and Absalom were dead), Adonijah, prepared to assume the throne. He gained the support of Joab and the priest Abiathar, despite the fact that David had already indicated his desire that Solomon succeed him as king.

Adonijah prepared a feast and invited his supporters, intending for them to proclaim him king before David was even dead. He must have assumed that David was now too weak to act and that his action would preempt any effort by Solomon to take the throne after his father’s death. When Nathan the prophet got word of Adonijah’s attempt to seize the throne, he informed Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon (and apparently David’s favorite wife), along with Benaiah, the captain of David’s bodyguard, and Zadok the priest. They went immediately to David and told him what Adonijah had done. David quickly took steps to forestall his oldest surviving son’s takeover attempt by ordering that Solomon be anointed king at once, rather than awaiting David’s death. They followed David’s instructions, placing Solomon on the royal mule and anointing him in a public ceremony outside of Jerusalem. Thus, while Adonijah and his supporters were celebrating their clever coup, they were being outflanked. They heard noise in the direction of Jerusalem, and when they inquired about all the commotion, they were appalled to hear that the entire city was celebrating the anointing of Solomon as the new king. Realizing that they had been beaten at their own

game, Adonijah's supporters quickly and quietly faded into the woodwork, hoping that no one had noticed their presence at the treasonous gathering.

DAVID'S DEATH AND SOLOMON'S ACCESSION

Solomon, of course, knew the identities of the leaders of the attempted coup and dealt with them in turn shortly after David passed away peacefully in his sleep. David had advised him about what to do. Adonijah immediately vowed allegiance to the new king, and Solomon spared his life (this was more than Adonijah would have done had he succeeded to the throne). Not long after, however, Adonijah requested the young virgin, Abishag, as his wife. Solomon recognized this request as a symptom of Adonijah's continued desire for the throne (remember, possession of the king's harem was a symbol of royal power and prestige), and had him executed on the spot by Benaiah, who became the new commander of the army.

Abiathar was not executed, in consideration of his long and faithful service to David, but he was removed from the priesthood and forced into retirement. Zadok, who had supported Solomon, became the high priest.

Joab, who by this time had become uncontrollable, had to go. David himself had recognized this, though he could never bring himself to do the deed. Solomon finally found the courage to do what David should have done long before - he ordered Joab's execution, finally putting an end to all the blood-letting that had occurred at the hands of the sons of Zeruiah.

One enemy remained to be dealt with - Shimei, the man who had cursed David as he fled from Jerusalem at the time of Absalom's rebellion. Though David had spared his life, he told Solomon to deal with him. Solomon put Shimei under house arrest, telling him that he would only guarantee his safety as long as he remained in Jerusalem. Three years later, two of Shimei's slaves escaped and he went to retrieve them. Having violated the conditions of his "imprisonment," he was forthwith put to death.

With the death of Shimei, Solomon's kingdom was finally secure. He then set about to do the job for which his father had prepared the way - the construction of the Temple.

APPLICATIONS OF THE STORY

Several applications may be drawn from the closing years of David's life. In connection with the numbering of the people, we certainly should note that God's people should gain their confidence and security from God Himself rather than from the earthly power (whether military, economic, intellectual, or cultural) at their disposal. Such power fades away very quickly and can accomplish little of eternal value.

Secondly, the preparations made by David for the building of the Temple show us again where his heart truly rested. David's greatest concern, despite all his problems and responsibilities, was for the glory of God. Even though God did not permit him to construct the Temple, and even though he himself would never see the results of his labors, he did all that he could to see that it became a reality. May we contribute our efforts to the glory of God with the same unstinting enthusiasm, whether or not the fruit of those labors is visible in our lifetimes.