

Chapter 6 David – The King

This set of notes will cover five episodes in the kingship of David – we will try not to get bogged down into too much detail.

For reading: the second book of Samuel, selected readings from chapters 1 through 22. This part of David's story reads a bit like a movie script, with violence, sex, intrigue, plots and counterplots and tragedies enough to satisfy any soap opera junkie. But woven into the story are several important lessons we can take to heart.

The five episodes are:

- 1 David becomes king, first over Judah and eventually over all of Israel. Key readings are 2 Samuel chapters 1 and 2 and chapter 5:1-5.
- 2 David conquers Jerusalem and the ark is brought to Jerusalem. Key readings are 2 Samuel chapter 5:6-15, chapters 6 and 7.
- 3 David and Mephibosheth. Key reading is 2 Samuel chapter 9.
- 4 David and Bathsheba. Key readings are 2 Samuel chapter 11 and 12.
- 5 David's unruly family: rape, murder, rebellion and chaos. Readings 2 Samuel chapters 13 through 21.

David becomes king.

For reading: Chapters 1 thru 5.

The second book of Samuel deals with David's life as king. David and his men (and their families) were still living in Ziklag, in Philistine territory, when the news of the defeat of the Israelites and the death of Saul and Jonathan reached them. The messenger who brought the news told David that he had killed Saul (chapter 1:6-10), possibly thinking that David would reward someone who, in a sense, opened the way for David to become king. Bad miscalculation – David reacted by having the messenger killed – not because he was the messenger, but because he claimed to have killed Saul. David had on previous occasions refused to kill Saul or have him killed, as he considered Saul to be the Lord's anointed, despite Saul's shortcomings and his paranoia regarding David. The second half of chapter 1 describes David's lament for Saul and Jonathan – a piece of poetry similar to some of the beautiful Psalms attributed to David.

David and his followers moved from Ziklag in Philistine to Hebron in Judah. Here he was approached by the leaders of the Judean clans and proclaimed king over Judah. Keep in mind that the kingdom of Israel had been virtually destroyed at the battle where Saul died, and the country must have been in disarray and drifting leaderless for a while. David had, in the past, protected the Judean settlements (refer to 1 Samuel 25, for example). He had also smoothed the way somewhat when he shared the spoils of his campaign against the Amalekites with the leaders of the Judean clans (1 Samuel 30:26-31). This history paved the way for him to be accepted as king by the Judeans.

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In the northern part of the kingdom, a surviving son of Saul, Ish-Bosheth, had been made king over the remnant of Israel by the military leader, Abner. This resulted in a long-drawn out civil war between the northern kingdom and the southern one. Over a period of close to eight years, animosity between the two entities prevented either of them to really settle down and prosper. Under David's rule Judah fared better than Israel (chapter 3:1). The civil war resulted in great bitterness on both sides – as such wars usually do. In one incident Abner killed Asahel, a brother of Joab, the leader of the Judean forces. This would eventually have far-reaching consequences.

During the war Abner became a strong influence in the northern kingdom (chapter 3:6). As king, Ish-Bosheth would have taken over the royal household, including Saul's servants and concubines. He accused Abner of sexual misconduct with one of the concubines – possibly out of jealousy¹. This was a strategic error on the part of Ish-Bosheth because Abner then arranged to hand the northern kingdom over to David. Abner conferred with the leaders of the Israelite clans and sent a messenger to David to inform him of the developments.

After successful negotiations Abner was on his way back to Israel when Joab found out about the developments. He did not trust Abner (chapter 3:24, 25), and in any case harboured a grudge because of the death of his brother Asahel. Without David's knowledge he sent messengers after Abner, asking him to return to Hebron where he murdered Abner (verse 27).

David was furious when he found out and disclaimed any complicity in the murder. He arranged a extravagant funeral for Abner, participating as a mourner himself.

Meanwhile, back in Israel, two of Ish-Bosheth's warrior leaders (Baanah and Recab) decided that, in order to ingratiate themselves with David as the future king, the best thing they could do is to kill Ish-Bosheth. Which they did, and as proof of the deed, they decapitated him. Carrying the grisly proof of their (supposed) loyalty to David, they went to Hebron. David, however, did not see this as welcome news, and accused them of killing an innocent man – and they were executed for the murder. (Chapter 4)

David now became king over all of Israel – the two kingdoms were combined. The capital city was still Hebron – Jerusalem was not yet in Israelite hand – that will be the subject of the next section of this chapter on David's life.

For pause and reflection: David's path to the throne of the combined kingdom was long and full of intrigue, betrayal, murder and sorrow. Throughout this episode David displayed a real sense of forgiveness and kindness:

- ***He mourned for Saul and Jonathan – and executed the messenger who claimed to have killed Saul.***
- ***He condemned the murder of Abner and participated as a mourner at his funeral.***
- ***He mourned the murder of Ish-Bosheth and executed the murderers.***
- ***He basically adopted a son of Jonathan (Mephibosheth) as his own, as we'll see later in the notes.***

¹ My own idea – not explicit in the narrative. Hennie.

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Although he might have had reason enough to gloat or rejoice at the events noted above, David did the opposite. It would appear that he had truly forgiven Saul and his family for the wrongs done to him.

David appears to have anticipated part of the Lord's Prayer: Father forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

David conquers Jerusalem and the ark is brought to Jerusalem.

Read chapters 5 and 6.

As a capital city, Hebron was not ideal. At the time it was located on an important trading route, but with a poor defensive structure. Jerusalem, about 20 km further north, offered a better proposition. As the stronghold of the Jebusites, Jerusalem was considered impregnable. Located on a series of hills and with a reliable water supply from the Gihon spring, it was an ideal fortress. The Jebusites were so confident of their fortress that they taunted David and his army, telling them the blind and the lame would be an adequate defense against the attack. (Chapter 5:6-8).

David, however, managed to conquer the stronghold, by making use of the water tunnel system. Archeological excavations have identified several tunnels associated with the Spring of Gihon, carved into solid rock at different times. The earliest system dates to the time of the Canaanites, predating David, so it is possible that this provided access for at least part of the attacking force.

Renamed the City of David, it became the seat of power in Israel.

One of the neighbouring kings (Hiram, king of Tyre) sent cedar logs and tradesmen to build a palace for David. This indicates that strong commercial and trade ties existed between Israel and the maritime trading cities. Once David had his palace, he wanted to build a temple. He was prevented from doing that – God's message through the prophet Nathan was that it would be his successor's role to build the temple.

During this period, when David stabilised and secured the kingdom by defeating the Philistines in a series of battles (Chapter 5;17-25), he also established and expanded his household. While at Hebron, David had 7 wives – Chapter 3:2-5. One of these, Maacah, was the daughter of a neighbouring king – possibly a marriage to strengthen a political alliance. David insisted on recovering his first wife Michal at the time of negotiating the acceptance of the kingship over Israel (chapter 3:13-16).

For pause and reflection: Deuteronomy 17 verses 14 to 20 detail the requirements of the king to be appointed over Israel - it was foreseen that this political development was inevitable once the people had settled down. Based on the history of David thus far and the requirements of Deuteronomy, how would you rate his performance as king thus far?

As the kingdom was stable, and the main enemy, the Philistines, defeated (for the moment), David decided to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark had been kept at the house of Abinadap the priest (1 Samuel 7:1) after being returned by the Philistines (1 Samuel 6:7).

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The repatriation expedition was organized as an exceptionally large celebration. We read that David took 30,000² chosen men of Israel with him to bring the ark back. Whatever the actual number might have been – it would have represented a substantial part of the male population of warrior age. Music and dancing were part of the celebratory program (verse 5).

In transporting the ark, however, David made a serious mistake. Explicit instructions existed on how to transport the ark (Exodus 25:12-14) and these had been followed during the exodus and the initial settlement of the land. When the Philistines captured the ark (1 Samuel 4:11) and experienced a plague of boils and rats they returned the ark by placing it on a new wooden cart, pulled by two cows (described in 1 Samuel chapter 6). David copied the Philistines in having a new cart made and placing the ark on it, instead of having the priests carry it.

Nearing the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah, one of the men walking close to the ark touched it and died on the spot. The narrative records that David was angry and afraid (verses 8 and 9). The ark was offloaded and kept in the house of another man (Obed-Edom). Obed-Edom might have been a Levite, and as such a member of the tribe that had been entrusted with the care of the ark when it was first constructed. Obed-Edom and his household were blessed due to the presence of the ark, and after three months David decided to try again.

For pause and reflection: David's emotional reaction to this tragedy is described as "anger and fear".

- ***Was David angry with God or with himself, seeing his attempt to honour God had resulted in a display of God's wrath?***
- ***David "was afraid of the Lord" (verse 9) – this emotion is different from "fearing the Lord". The latter describes a wholesome reverence of God, while the former describes a feeling of anxiety, of being scared.***
- ***Was David afraid because of a sense of guilt? He was after all the one who arranged the incorrect transport arrangements for the ark.***

Try to put yourself into David's shoes – what might your reactions have been?

This time they got the transport instructions right. The procession entered Jerusalem, with David being one of the main dancers, wearing a linen ephod. This was probably not a particularly good garment for vigorous dancing, as we read that his wife Michal saw his dancing and despised him for it. She accused him of exposing himself in front of the crowd (verse 20).

David now had his fortress city, and the ark of the covenant was secured within it. All seemed to be going well for David. Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 of 2 Samuel speak to this plateau of achievement and David's gratitude to God for bringing him thus far (chapter 7). David conducted several further campaigns to fully secure the kingdom – the Edomites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans and lastly the Ammonites all were defeated and became subject to David, paying tribute.

² Again – be careful with the number. See also the note in chapter 2 of this series.

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David and Mephibosheth.

Read Chapter 9.

During this time of (relative) peace and prosperity David enquired about the remnants of Jonathan's family. One might think David wanted to make sure that there were none of Saul's and Jonathan's family around to challenge his right to the kingdom. (*Centuries later, the norm during the Middle Ages in Europe was for a new king to eliminate all potential counterclaimants to the throne. Murder and exile were the common weapons used*).

But David's motivation is quite the opposite. Chapter 9 describes the incident well. David started to search for someone from Saul's family (and by extension Jonathan's family) to whom he could show kindness. Research brought Jonathan's son Mephibosheth to David. He was crippled in both feet – the result of his caregiver falling when trying to escape after the defeat of the Israelites when Saul and Jonathan were killed (2 Samuel 4:4). As a cripple and a fugitive, Mephibosheth would have had a tough life, being cared for by others who may or may not have been kind to him. Most cripples in those days ended up as beggars.

David restored all of Saul's lands and property to Mephibosheth and treated him like one of his sons (Verse 11).

For pause and reflection: This act of kindness is in line with David's reactions when he heard about Saul and Jonathan falling in battle, about the murder of Abner and about the murder of Ish-Bosheth. David appears to go to extreme lengths to be seen to respect and be generous to Saul's family and their memory.

David's actions could be interpreted in two ways:

- ***He was sincere in his respect and care for Saul and his family, out of a sense of fairness and compassion.***
- ***He was an astute politician, and knew the people would like him, as the new king, to show respect to his predecessor and his family. (See 2 Samuel 3:36 and maybe 3:39 for a possible clue to this interpretation).***

Refer back to your thoughts on the first "Pause and Reflection" in chapter 1 of this series. What would be your conclusion regarding David's show of compassion and care?

On a personal note – are we always honest in our motives when we do "something good for someone"?

David and Bathsheba.

Read Chapters 11 and 12.

This episode in David's life is arguably the best-known story of David out of all his history. I shall recap just briefly, to highlight some key elements that we might learn from.

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Spring was campaigning season in the Levant – just as it was in later centuries all over the world. In winter, everyone hunkered down and prepared for war. When spring arrived, it was time to address security issues, to defend against raiders and/or go raiding. Up to this point in time, David had always been at the forefront of his warriors – he led in person.

But this year David sent Joab out with the army and he stayed home. Not only did the army march off to battle, but the ark of the covenant was carried with them (2 Samuel 11:11) – symbolic of the Lord Himself going out with the army. But David stayed home.

For pause and reflection: David appears to have lost motivation. Up to this point in time he was focused on establishing and securing the kingdom of Israel and promoting and centralizing worship. By bringing the ark to Jerusalem David had made the city not only the center of political power, but also the center of worship.

What might have caused David to lose focus like that? Did he think “I’ve done it – I am a made man?” Was he tired of the rough life?

What might cause us to lose our focus on serving God, especially in this time of isolation and pandemic stress?

Whatever David’s reasoning might have been – this must be seen as a clear dereliction of duty.

One evening he enjoyed the evening from the rooftop of the palace and saw Bathsheba bathing. One thing led to another, and David had an affair with Bathsheba.

She became pregnant and this put David in a bind – his adultery would become known. And adultery was, after all, punishable by death (Deuteronomy 20:10).

David devised a plan: he would arrange for Uriah to come back to Jerusalem, and he would then visit his wife and the baby could be passed off as his and thus legitimate. But that did not work, as Uriah abstained from contact with his wife. He justified his refusal to go home by referencing the fact that the ark of the Lord and his comrades were in the field, sleeping in tents. He would not dishonour them by sleeping in his own bed. David tried twice to get Uriah to visit his wife, both times unsuccessfully.

David must have been getting desperate and resorted to murder by proxy of the Ammonite enemy (2 Samuel 12:9). A letter to Joab placed Uriah in the front line of the battle and then exposed him by withdrawing his support. (2 Samuel 11:14-17).

Bathsheba heard about her husband’s death, mourned for the prescribed period, and then became David’s wife and bore him a son.

Nathan the prophet confronted David. He told a story of a rich man taking the only lamb from a poor man to feed his guest (2 Samuel 12:1-5). It must have sounded to David as if Nathan were bringing a dispute to him to be settled and he walked right into Nathan’s trap. According to David, the man who stole the lamb was worthy of death and would have to pay a four-fold penalty for the lamb (verse 6).

That was when Nathan dropped the bomb on David: “You are that man!”

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After listening to Nathan's rebuke, David confessed his sin. The punishment for adultery was death, according to Old Testament law. Whether David was prepared to die (and take Bathsheba with him) we would never know, because David was forgiven by the Lord (verse 14).

However, the consequences of his sin would mean the death of the child. Nathan also told David that the Lord would bring calamity on him and his family because he, David, had dishonoured God in front of the enemy. Eventually David would lose 3 sons due to events traceable back to his infidelity with Bathsheba (the baby, Amnon and Absalom).

For pause and reflection: The David/Bathsheba incident illustrates what James the Elder would write in his letter some 9 or 10 centuries later. See James 1:14-15 – this has been referred to as “the slippery slope to sin”:

James 1

14 But each one is tempted when by his own evil desires he is lured away and enticed. 15 Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

David had a desire for another man's wife, created the opportunity to have an affair with her, then committed murder to try and cover up his sin, with the end result of death and chaos – not only the immediate result but also the long-term result.

We need to be on our guard not to venture out on this slope.

David's unruly family – rape, murder, mayhem, and chaos.

In this last section we need to cover a lot of ground and will touch only on some key events.

Read chapters 13 thru 20.

David had fifteen sons and one daughter who are named in the narrative and several more who are unnamed (1 Chronicles 3:1-9). With at least eight wives (named) and several more wives and concubines, it certainly was a chaotic family.

2 Samuel 13:1-20:

The drama starts with Amnon, David's son by his wife Ahinoam and Tamar, David's daughter. Tamar was Absalom's sister, their mother was Maacah. Amnon fell in love with his half-sister – even though such a relationship would have been strictly forbidden under the law. With a friend he devised a plan to get Tamar alone, even duping David into playing a part in the deception. David visited Amnon, who pretended to be ill. Amnon requested David to ask Tamar to prepare food and feed him, then he would get better.

Amnon ended up raping Tamar, and worse still, rejecting her afterwards. She was emotionally destroyed by the event and sought shelter with her brother Absalom. Absalom, for his part, did not confront Amnon regarding the issue, but developed hatred for him.

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David was furious when he heard about this episode (verse 21) but he did not confront and deal with the situation.

There is a saying: “Revenge is a dish best eaten cold”. Absalom practiced this – he waited two years before taking revenge. Under the pretext to arrange a feast during the sheep shearing time (ref also the event with Nabal described in 1 Samuel 25) Absalom invited David to join him. David declined, and all the other princes went to the feast. Absalom had Amnon killed during the feast, while the other brothers escaped and fled back to Jerusalem. Absalom escaped to Geshur³ and lived there for three years in exile.

Absalom must have been a popular man in the kingdom because Joab contrived to have him return from exile. The convoluted plot is described in chapter 14. Absalom is described as exceptionally handsome (verse 25). His pride appears to have been his hair (verse 26).

Absalom started to conspire against David (chapter 15). He played to the crowd (verses 2 to 6) and built his following over a period of four years. When he felt the time was right, he had himself declared king in Hebron. Hebron was significant because that is where David was elected king over Judah and later all of Israel.

Absalom had gathered such momentum that, when David heard about the rebellion, he and his advisors fled Jerusalem. His family went with him – but he left ten concubines behind to look after the palace (2 Sam 15:16).

The rebellion against David included some prominent people who had either been in positions of trust or indebted to David. Among the rebels and supporters were Ahithopel, a trusted councillor of David (2 Sam 15:12 and 16:23) who was Bathsheba’s grandfather (2 Sam 2:3; 23:34) and Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s crippled son whom David had “adopted” as his own (2 Sam 16:3).

Absalom entered Jerusalem with Ahithopel as his advisor. On the advice of Ahithopel, Absalom had a tent set up on the palace roof, where he had intercourse in public with the ten concubines David had left behind (2 Sam 16:21, 22). This was the fulfillment of the prophecy Nathan spoke to David after the affair with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:11, 12). Possibly Ahithopel’s advice was given as revenge for the affair David had had with his granddaughter.

For pause and reflection: David chose to address the crisis in his family by ignoring it. Amnon’s murder went unavenged, Absalom was restored to the royal household. This had far-reaching effects – eventually throwing the whole nation into turmoil.

Emboldened by David’s lack of action, Absalom staged a coup and civil war resulted.

There may be areas in our own lives where we choose not to confront a weakness or sin directly and allow it to fester. Just like David’s inaction, our inaction may eventually have serious consequences.

The subsequent civil war between Absalom and David tore the nation apart. In preparation for the battle David divided his men into three groups, appointing trusted men as leaders. These men were all

³ Geshur was a city or state located in what is today called the Golan heights.

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members of the “Thirty” – David’s chosen warriors⁴ (2 Sam 23:8-39). David stayed behind, on the advice of his men – they realized that, if David were in the field, he would become the focal point of the battle.

David’s men won the battle, and Absalom was killed. His hair, which had been his pride (see 14:26), was his undoing. It got caught in the branches of an oak tree and Joab and his men killed him. When David heard the news, he mourned for Absalom and did not acknowledge the victory by Joab and the rest of the warriors. Joab chastised David, pointing out that his mourning for Absalom threatened to destroy the morale of the men and result in wholesale desertion.

David pulled himself together and rallied the men. He also sent an envoy to the leaders of the tribes that had followed Absalom and won them over to his side again. But the schism was not fully healed. Another rebel, Sheba, took advantage of the unsettled situation and fomented a second revolution. He and his men occupied Abel Beth Maacah, a fortification located at the northern tip of present-day Israel, north of the Sea of Galilee. Acting on David’s instructions Abishai and David’s loyal men besieged the fortress. When the population realised that they had no hope of winning, they turned on Sheba, decapitated him and thus ended the second rebellion.

David’s reign was secure again.

For pause and reflection: We have followed David from his early days as a shepherd boy to king of Israel. His story includes descriptions of his devotion to God and the depth and sincerity of his worship. The story further includes descriptions of his compassion and kindness. The story also includes descriptions of human weakness. Anger, cruelty, temptation, infidelity, betrayal and indecision are all evident at some point in time.

There is, however, one consistent aspect of David’s life that traces through all of this, and that is his trust in the Lord and his genuine repentance when he failed to be the person God made him to be – a man after God’s own heart.

We are all “David” to some degree or the other. We fall short of the person God made us to be and wants us to be. Do we, like David, show true remorse and repentance?

This is the end of chapter 6.

⁴ Uriah was one of these warriors, as was Bathsheba’s father.