

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

II Samuel

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2013.

David, Jesus' Ancestor

"I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star." – Revelation 22:16

I Samuel Chapters 29 -II Samuel 1 – “The King is Dead. Long Live the King!”

In our last study we saw how the doctrine of God's election played out in the life of Saul. Saul is anointed of the Lord, but is also rejected by God because of his disobedience and ultimate faithlessness in consulting a witch. Yet to be anointed by God is to be chosen by him. This is the great truth of election (II Corinthians 1:21; I John 2:20). Even in the ignominy of death David insists that Saul is the anointed of the Lord. Saul then is a concrete example of God's election which can never be set aside (Romans 11: 29). This section also includes the struggles of David, not against Saul, but against the enemies of Israel, the Philistines and the Amalekites.

I. David – Israel's Champion – I Samuel Chapters 29-30

Incredibly, David has maintained his relationship with King Achish of the Philistines. Achish is totally convinced of David's loyalty to the point where he has made him his bodyguard (I Samuel 28:2). However the other Philistine commanders are not persuaded at all. They recognize David and know his reputation too well. They ask,

“Is this not David, of whom they sing to one another in dances,

‘Saul has killed his thousands, And David his ten thousands?’”

Achish maintains his support of David but the Philistine commanders want nothing to do with him (I Samuel 29:6). It's possible that some of them remember what David did to Goliath, the Philistines' great champion. Achish, however, makes sure that David and his men are able to leave safely (I Samuel 29:10-11).

The next event concerns a raid on the Israelite city of Ziklag where it seems many of David's men had family. The Amalekites have attacked the city, burned it down, and taken captive all the women and children including David's two wives. David and his men are devastated. They weep “until they had no more strength to weep” (I Samuel 30:4). David finds himself in a dangerous position because apparently his men and the people who were with him (whose identity is not made clear) hold him responsible for the fate of the city.

Indeed they are on the point of stoning David! (I Samuel 30:6). However, we read that “David strengthened himself in the Lord his God” (I Samuel 30:6). There are several important spiritual lessons here.

A. Watch Out for the Amalekites

We are puzzled by the striking story of Saul’s disobedience in I Samuel 15. God had commanded Saul to “utterly destroy” the Amalekites, men, women, children and all their livestock (I Samuel 15:3). This seems awfully brutal to us and conjures up the image so many people have of the wrathful God of the Old Testament. What Saul does appears to make sense (it certainly seems less than the later sins of David). Saul spares the king, Agag, as well as the best of the livestock (I Samuel 15:9). Samuel however is outraged at what he sees as flagrant disobedience to God’s command, and it is at this point that he announces that God is taking Saul’s kingdom away from him (I Samuel 15:28). Finally, Samuel himself literally hacks King Agag to pieces (I Samuel 15:33). We as modern (or post-modern) readers can easily find ourselves repulsed by the extreme violence of this story. God however makes strong points through his prophets that we dare not miss.

We are also repulsed by the example of Hosea having to marry a prostitute (Hosea 1:2). Even people who basically want to take the Bible literally seem ready to take this as a symbolic account that could not have actually happened. This reaction however does nothing less than tone down the Bible and replaces its stark message of God’s judgment and grace with comfortable platitudes. This is not the God whose ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), not the God who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29).

The Amalekites represent the enemies of God. They opposed Israel in the exodus (I Samuel 15:2). They further symbolize all the forces that can trap or even destroy the people of God. Saul in tolerating their leader or even their possessions is holding on to things that seek to oppose God and threaten his people. Would that Saul had been more diligent in destroying every trace of them! The destruction of Ziklag might have been avoided. It is not the case that their sheep and cattle were without value. They were the best of what they possessed (I Samuel 15:9). Yet they were part of a system opposed to God and his people.

The Amalekites are like the sin in our lives. God wants to remove it totally but we often want to hold on to part of it. Sin is not an isolated act. It is a way of life, a pattern that turns us away from the Lord. Within that way of life there may be good and admirable things (like the sheep and the cattle of the Amalekites). Yet, even the good things of God’s creation can be misused and abused and thereby lead us into sin. All of us have traces of the Amalekites in our lives, sinful elements that we do not want to give up or whose practice we rationalize. These elements may be different things for different people as Paul points out in his discussion of the traces of idolatry (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8-10). Meat is good, but meat offered to an idol could be an obstacle for some Christians (I Corinthians 8:7-11). We express shock at the image of the prophet Samuel hacking King Agag to death. The symbolic lesson here is that this is how we should deal with our sin. We are of course to confess it (I John 1:9), but more than that we are to repent and, in effect, cut it out of lives (I Corinthians 6:9-11). The Christian certainly lives in freedom. Truly, “all things are lawful” (I

Corinthians 9:12). But anything that dominates us, no matter how good or indifferent it might be in and of itself, brings us under the power of sin. Christ has set us free from the power of sin including even the so-called good things we can find among the Amalekites (Romans 8:2-17; Galatians 5:13).

B. Do You Really Want to be a Leader?

What is remarkable in this story is how quickly the people turn on David. David himself has lost two wives in the raid on Ziklag. Nonetheless the people are ready to stone him (I Samuel 30:6). This is David, the Lord's anointed, the future king of Israel! What are they thinking of? Yet this is hardly a unique episode. The people of Israel grumbled and complained against Moses for years and even his own brother and sister turned on him (Exodus 16:2; Numbers 14:2; 12:1-16). The apostle Paul was the object of criticism among the Corinthians and was forced to defend himself (II Corinthians 10:7-18).

None of this should be surprising when we look at the example of Jesus. Peter gives him Satanic advice, the mother of James and John want special privileges, Judas betrays him and all the disciples desert him in his hour of trial (Matthew 16:23; Mark 10:35-40; Luke 22:3; Mark 14:50). Jesus expresses his frustration with the disciples (Matthew 17:16-17).

David finds himself in danger after the raid on Ziklag. It's easy to blame him because he's the leader. In the face of fierce criticism and even the threat of stoning we read that "David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (I Samuel 30:6). God then grants him a victory over the Amalekites aided by an Egyptian servant that the Amalekites left behind. Following the victory a number of those in David's army do not want to share the spoil from the victory with two hundred men who had been too exhausted to follow David on the raid (I Samuel 30:21-22). It's interesting that the narrator describes those who followed David, and therefore didn't want to share with those who hadn't as "corrupt and worthless fellows." It would seem they had a point in not wanting to share the benefits with those who hadn't been in the battle. David however will have none of this. He demonstrates his leadership and his mercy in sharing equally with all, those who fought and those who didn't. For David the unity of his followers was the most critical point. This is an important lesson for us also. There are no first and second class citizens in the church. Everyone should benefit equally. It's easy for one group to say "we're doing all the work so we should get special status." Yet in Christ we are all one (Galatians 3:28). David introduces this standard here.

II. Saul – Still the Anointed of the Lord – I Samuel 31-II Samuel 1

In chapter 31 we see Saul, his sons and the army of Israel being attacked by the Philistines. The battle goes badly for them just as Samuel had prophesied (I Samuel 28:19). Saul's three sons, Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchishua, all perish. Saul is fatally wounded. He asks his armor-bearer to finish him off with a sword. The armor-bearer however is terrified at the thought and can't do it. Saul then attempts to kill himself by falling on his own sword. The

armor-bearer follows suit and also falls on his sword. The men of Israel seeing this devastating loss then flee the battlefield.

The situation gets worse. The next day the Philistines find the bodies. They cut off the head of Saul, remove his armor and hang it in the temple of the ancient goddess here going by the name of Astarte (she is also known as Ishtar, Inanna and Isis). Saul's beheaded body is strung up at the city wall. The Philistines celebrate their great victory. However the valiant Israelite men of Jabesh-gilead carry out a night raid and recapture the bodies of Saul and his sons. They burn them and then bury the remains. So ends the life of Saul.

Or does it?

In the first chapter of II Samuel we have a fuller account of the death of Saul. Apparently falling on his sword did not finally kill him. Saul in desperation cries out to an Amalekite who agrees to finally kill him. This Amalekite brings the news to David's camp along with Saul's crown and his armlet. In the mind of this Amalekite soldier he was performing a mercy killing. David sees things very differently. He tears his clothes and begins a fast. He says to the Amalekite, "Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed" (II Samuel 1:14). David then commands one of his soldiers to kill the man. His final comment is "Your blood be on your head; for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed'" (1 II Samuel:16).

After all that has happened is Saul still the Lord's anointed? David insists that he is. There is no possibility of interpreting his words as Saul was The Lord's anointed. With Saul as an example we can now summarize the basic themes of the doctrine of election and predestination:

- 1 God chooses whom he will. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Romans 9:15).
- 2 Election (or being anointed by God) is in no way dependent on any human characteristic, merit or achievement.
- 3 Election guarantees no special privileges.
- 4 To be chosen is also to be rejected as Christ himself was (Mark 15:34).
- 5 Yet God's election can never be nullified by sin or human failure (Jeremiah 51:5; Romans 11:29).
- 6 To be elected means that one can never fall away completely (Romans 8:38-39). Does this include Judas (John 6:70-71)? We don't know (Romans 11:32).
- 7 We can never judge God's election by outward appearances. Some who appear to believe may not really and others who appear to reject Christ may embrace him (I John 2:18-19; I Tim. 1:15).

The great value of this doctrine is its guarantee of complete assurance. We are in God's

hands and NOTHING can ever take us out of his hands (John 10: 29).

This passage ends with David's lament over Saul and Jonathan. This is the origin of the famous line, "How the mighty have fallen." David reaffirms both Saul's status as the anointed of the Lord and his love for Jonathan (1:26). There is now seemingly no obstacle to David's assuming the throne of Israel. However as we will see in the succeeding chapters this is not the case.

Questions for Us –

- 1 What are some of the ways we rationalize the presence of sin in our lives as Saul wanted to keep the spoil of the Amalekites. What does the raid on Ziklag tell us about tolerating that which is opposed to God?
- 2 Why do you think those with David blame him for the raid? What does that tell us about leadership in general?
- 3 Why do you think the doctrine of election is so often misunderstood?

II Samuel 2-4 – “The War Continues”

In the beginning of this section, David is anointed king over Judah. However, that doesn't include all the other tribes of Israel. Saul's son lays claim to the throne of Israel so the battle between the houses of Saul and David continues. This is an extremely violent section of scripture. In these armed conflicts we need to see the symbolism of spiritual warfare. God is doing something new with David. Others want to hold on to the past with its previous alliances. David represents the army of the Lord. It is this army we are to serve in the complicated conflicts of our time.

I. Abner and Joab – Generals at War – II Samuel chapters 2-3

As the war continues between the armies of Saul and David, the key figures in the conflict are Abner son of Ner who supports Saul's son, Ishbaal and Joab son of Zeruiah who supports David. David still recognizes the validity of Saul's kingship and applauds those who gave his body a proper burial (after the desecration of the Philistines in I Samuel 31). David having been anointed by Samuel to be king over all Israel here is proclaimed king of Judah. On the other hand Abner proclaims Ishbaal, son of Saul, as king of Israel.

In spite of his important role we know little of Ishbaal. He seems to be a pawn in the power struggle. David speaks of him later as a “righteous man” (II Samuel 4:11). The real conflict in these chapters is between Abner and Joab as they criss cross alliances. There is a battle that takes place at Gibeon between twelve men of the house of Saul and twelve of David's men. The battle is fierce and bloody but the servants of David prevail over the army of Saul.

We read then of the three sons of Zeruiah who follow after Abner. Abner orders them to go back but one, Asahel, wants to continue to follow him. Apparently in frustration more than anything else, Abner strikes him in the stomach with the butt of his spear but this ends up killing Asahel. As the battle continues Abner raises the question, “Is the sword to keep devouring forever?” (II Samuel 2:26). This leads to a temporary truce during which the body of Asahel is buried in Bethlehem, an unanticipated note of hope in all this conflict (Micah 5:2).

In spite of this brief truce there is a “long war” between the house of Saul and the house of David (II Samuel 3:1). As the conflict continues the house of Saul grows weaker and weaker. David's family increases with a number of sons born to different wives (II Samuel 3:2-5). An element of intrigue appears next. As the war continues, Abner is “making himself strong in the house of Saul” (II Samuel 3:6). Apparently as an act of pride Abner takes for himself one of Saul's concubines. Ishbaal objects to this. In a sudden about face Abner announces that he is shifting loyalties to David! Needless to say, this makes us wonder if there isn't more to this story (was Ishbaal involved with this woman also?). However we are not being told this to satisfy our curiosity.

Abner announces his intention to David. David however sets a condition. He wants to have his first wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, returned to him. In the meantime she has remarried a man named Paltiel who weeps at his loss when Abner takes her away to satisfy David's demand (and we think we live with chaotic marriages!).

Abner then comes to David's camp with twenty men. David prepares a feast for him (II Samuel 3:20). Abner pledges to bring the full support of all Israel to David to guarantee his right to the throne. However, after Abner leaves, Joab returns and learning of Abner's actions he becomes suspicious and warns David against Abner (II Samuel 3:22-25). There is another reason for Joab's suspicions. Joab has a personal issue against Abner. Abner had killed his brother at the battle of Gibeon (II Samuel 2:12-17). On the pretense of speaking with him privately, Joab murders Abner in cold blood (II Samuel 3:27).

David is shocked at this brutal act of revenge. He insists that neither he nor his kingdom is guilty of Abner's blood. He proclaims a fast and a time of mourning for Abner. David appears to maintain his fast beyond a reasonable period. The people try to persuade David to eat something. Yet he refuses (II Samuel 3:35). The people however rally around David who separates himself from the increasingly bloody nature of the conflict. David cries out that he is powerless and speaks of Joab and his brothers as being "too violent for me" (II Samuel 3:39). Yet the violence continues.

II. The Death of Ishbaal – II Samuel Chapter 4

Ishbaal is clearly not a leader. When he hears of the death of Abner, "his courage failed" (II Samuel 4:1). Israel appears lost. What results seems an unnecessarily brutal and pointless act on the part of two captains of raiders. Apparently losing all confidence in Ishbaal these two brothers, Baanah and Rechab come into his house while he is taking a nap and kill him. They decapitate him and bring the head to David. It seems they are trying to ingratiate themselves with David now seeing that the war is lost. David responds to them as he did to the young man who ended Saul's life. The idea of Saul's anointing extends apparently to his sons. It may be that David is offended by such a brutal murder against one he describes as "a righteous man" (II Samuel 4:11). He puts them to death and cuts off their hands and feet. This is a brutal age but David illustrates the greatest measure of justice and mercy.

There remains one link to David's close friend, Jonathan. Following a tragic fall when he was only five years old, Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, becomes crippled. We will meet him again later.

What is the point of all this? This section sets up a classic confrontation between those who choose God's way and those who choose their own way. David clearly is God's anointed but many want to hold on to the past and support Saul's son. We also see in

Abner the example of choosing God's way for the wrong reasons. Yet in the midst of deceit and bloodshed we see God establishing his king and building his kingdom.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why is it so hard for us to follow God's way rather than our own way? Why do we so often try to repeat the patterns of the past?
2. Abner chooses to desert Ishbaal and join forces with David because of Ishbaal's criticism of his relationship with one of Saul's concubines. Abner basically is doing the right thing for the wrong reason. We in effect frequently do the same thing. Why do you think this is?
3. How do you see David as a leader in this section? What can we learn from his example?

II Samuel 5-7 – “David’s kingdom Established”

This section provides a climax to the ongoing war between David and the house of Saul. Here David is confirmed as king of all Israel. It is not ultimately the elders who declare David to be king but God. David then is given a city, Jerusalem and becomes “greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him” (II Samuel 5:10). David will also be given the sacred task of bringing the ark of the covenant into his city. God affirms his steadfast love to David and his house forever. This is the promise that receives final confirmation in David’s son, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, already at this stage, we see problems with David’s relationships with women which later will greatly undermine his status as king, but still not destroy it.

II. Shepherd of Israel – chapter 5

David, now at last, is proclaimed King of Israel. The people’s choosing him though only ratifies the decision of the Lord which goes all the way back to when he was anointed by Samuel (I Samuel 16:1-13). David is thirty years old when he becomes king and reigns for forty years (II Samuel 5:4). David’s first action is to take the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites. He officially renames it the city of David. David expands the city because the Lord was with him and he became “greater and greater” (II Samuel 5:10). The King of Tyre, no less, sends trees, carpenters and masons to build David a house which will essentially be his palace. This recognition from a foreign king is David’s confirmation that the Lord has established him as king over Israel (II Samuel 5:12). Often the confirmation of the Lord’s actions from outside the community of faith gives special weight to God’s word. For example, the Samaritans proclaim Jesus as the “savior of the world” while Jerusalem still largely rejects him (John 4:39-42) and a demon possessed slave girl testifies to the truth of Paul’s gospel (Acts 16:16-18).

Yet there is a hint of danger here. We read that David takes more concubines and wives (II Samuel 5:13). This is in violation of God’s creation standard of one man and one woman (Matthew 19:1-9). The writer gives no hint of condemnation at this point. Nonetheless we begin to see a tendency that David can presumably take any woman he wants. This will lead to the greatest crisis in his reign. There is always the danger that when the Lord blesses us that we can become complacent or self centered and forget the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

At this point this is only a distant concern for the future. The Lord continues to strengthen the hand of David giving him one victory after another. The Lord gives him the power to overcome Israel’s persistent enemy, the Philistines (II Samuel 5:17-25).

III. The Ark of the Covenant – chapter 6

Now that David has established his city, Jerusalem, and built his house his next step is to bring the ark of the covenant into the city. The ark has remained in a tent or a tabernacle since the exodus. David is prepared to give it a permanent home in his city. The ark is mounted on a new cart built presumably for that purpose. The ark had been in the home of Abinadab where it had been for some twenty years after the Philistines had captured it and then returned it (I Samuel 7:1-2). Two sons of Abinadab, Uzzah and Ahio accompany the procession. At one point Uzzah reaches his hand out to steady the ark. God becomes angry at this and strikes him dead on the spot (II Samuel 6:6-7)! David becomes angry with the Lord over this and it is hard not to agree with him. This is a difficult text. Why would God be so severe as to strike dead someone who was trying to protect the ark not defile it? We are confronted here with an extreme picture of the holiness of God. All we can say is that the things that pertain to God must always be treated with special reverence. This is perhaps why Paul says that those who do not celebrate the Lord's Supper appropriately may suffer judgment (I Corinthians 11:27-32). Paul adds that when we are judged by the Lord we will not be condemned with the world (I Corinthians 11:32). This is the lesson here. We are not to forget that we deal with a holy God whose ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

But not surprisingly David is now afraid of the Lord (II Samuel 6:9). He leaves the ark in the home of one Obed-edom the Gittite. The ark remains in Obed-edom's house for three months during which time the Lord blessed him and his family (II Samuel 6:11). Hearing this David is prepared to try again to bring the ark into Jerusalem (II Samuel 6:12-13). This is done with great rejoicing including dancing and music. David himself dances "before the Lord with all his might" (II Samuel 6:14). This underscores that in spite of the solemnity of dealing with the Lord celebration and rejoicing are very appropriate. The ark is brought into a special tent which David had prepared (II Samuel 6:17). However David's first wife, Michal, the daughter of Saul, does not approve of this at all. In fact she despises David. There clearly may be more to this than David's dancing like "any vulgar fellow" (II Samuel 6:20). We don't know the full extent of her resentment but David does bring up the issue of her father Saul whom he has replaced. The final comment indicates that she and David have no marital relations from this point forward (II Samuel 6:23).

IV. God's Covenant with David – chapter 7

David now being established as king in Jerusalem thinks about a proper home for the ark of the covenant. God speaks to David and confirms his call to him. However God says that it will be David's son who will build a "house for my name" (II Samuel 7:13). We will see this later with Solomon. God here makes multiple promises to David:

1. God who called David as a young shepherd will make for him "a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth" (II Samuel (7:9).

2. God will establish a home for his people free from their enemies ((II Samuel 7:10).
3. God will establish David's descendents and his kingdom ((II Samuel 7:12-13).
4. Speaking presumably of Solomon God will be a father to him. He will punish him when he commits iniquity but God will not take his steadfast love from him ((II Samuel 7:14-15).
5. God will establish David's throne forever ((II Samuel 7:16).

David then praises the Lord. He acknowledges that this is all a promise made from the heart of God ((II Samuel 7:20-21). David then asks God to confirm his promise ((II Samuel 7:25). At the center of this promise is the assurance that David's house will be established forever. This is a revelation that gives David courage ((II Samuel 7:27). God is trustworthy and true ((II Samuel 7:28). David is assured then of God's eternal promise.

This promise is made freely. It is not dependent on David or on any of his descendents or on Israel in general. Throughout all of this God is making a name for himself ((II Samuel 7:23). When we encounter the true God, the God of the Bible, we are dealing with promises that will not be broken because they are the promises of God not those of human beings. Whatever else we may or may not understand about God's plan and purposes we know that he has promised his steadfast love to us ((II Samuel 7:15). This promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Paul makes this explicit in the opening statement of his letter to the Romans (Romans 1:1-6). The gospel of Jesus Christ includes the fact that Jesus was descended from David "according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3). If we don't understand the promises of God we will never understand the gospel. These promises have their initial definition in II Samuel chapter 7. Paul sums this up in one of the most assuring and comforting statements in scripture, "for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). If they fail then God fails. But God cannot fail.

"God is not a human being, that he should lie,
or a mortal that he should change his mind.
Has he promised, and will he not do it?
Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19)

Amen!

Questions for Us –

- a. How is being blessed by the Lord a danger that we may become complacent in our faith? How can we keep from falling into complacency?

- b. Why do you think God strikes Uzzah dead when he reaches out to keep the ark from falling? What lessons can we learn from this example?
- c. Why is it so important to remember that we stand on the promises of God and not on our own strengths and achievements?

II Samuel 8-10 – “David’s Justice”

In these three chapters we see David established as Israel’s king. We are told repeatedly that “The Lord gave victory to David wherever he went” (II Samuel 8:6, 14). David rules with “justice and equity” (II Samuel 8:15). He shows compassion and kindness to Jonathan’s lame son, Mephibosheth. He shows compassion even to his enemies. Even when he has to fight them his goal is to make peace (II Samuel 10:19). This is the golden era of David’s reign but it is hard to read these passages without being aware of the dark shadow that is soon to fall over David, his family and his entire kingdom.

I. “David won a name for Himself” – chapter 8

David is fighting the Lord’s battles on many fronts. He goes against the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans and the Edomites. God gives him victory in all of these encounters. In turn David dedicates all the wealth of these nations to the Lord. We read that “David won a name for himself” (II Samuel 8:13).

What are the lessons for us in this chapter? They would seem to be the following. First, you cannot serve God without conflict. God gives David victory. Peace is won at a high cost. We do not live in a neutral world. There is opposition to God and to the gospel in many areas. We are called to spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-17; I Peter 5:8-9). David is neither timid nor afraid. We need to identify the opposition both in our lives and in the world. We are not called to defend ourselves, still less to fight for ourselves. We are called to victory in the Lord. Second, this requires discernment (I John 4:1). David does not react in the same way to all the peoples he confronts. He accepts gifts from King Toi of Hamath. Not every one is an enemy. David however is not naïve. Having subdued Edom (II Samuel 8:11-12) he returns to fight them again (II Samuel 8:13). Some battles need to be fought more than once.

Is the writer presenting us with an implied contradiction in his statement that “David won a name for himself” (II Samuel 8:13)? If it is the Lord who is giving the victory to David how is he winning a name *for himself*? Do we see here the beginnings of a pride that will lead David into the greatest tragedy of his life? When the Lord favors us the temptation to take him for granted or even to forget him is always close at hand (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

II. David – Compassion and Justice – chapters 9-10

The remarkable thing about the opening of chapter 9 is David’s expressed desire to show kindness to “the house of Saul.” His desire is to do this “for Jonathan’s sake” (II Samuel 9:1). Yet the focus is on the “house of Saul.” Saul was in many ways David’s bitterest enemy, one who betrayed him and tried to kill him. We could well understand David limiting his concern to the family of Jonathan but that’s not what he does. The

house of Saul is broader than Jonathan's descendents. This is a remarkable example of David's compassion and mercy.

It turns out that Jonathan had a son, Mephibosheth, who is crippled in both his feet (II Samuel 9:3). David not only arranges for Mephibosheth to receive everything that had been part of the estate of Saul but he specifically provides for Mephibosheth to eat at his table. We are not told what David's estranged wife, Michal, thinks of this arrangement. It is clear that none of the inheritance of Saul is going to her since David is promising "all that belonged to Saul and to all his house" to Mephibosheth.

In the next chapter David's kindness is rewarded with abuse. Hearing of the death of the king of the Ammonites who had been loyal to David, he sends envoys to console the king's son on the death of his father. When David's envoys arrive in the land of the Ammonites they are greeted with suspicion by the princes of the land. These princes convince the king's son, Hanun, that the envoys are really spies. Hanun doesn't so much attack the envoys as disgrace them by cutting off half their beards and half their garments (II Samuel 10:3-4). The men return feeling ashamed but David provides for them to remain in Jericho until their beards are fully regrown, thereby removing the sign of their shame. David understandably is furious about the mistreatment of those whom he had sent to express his compassion.

The Ammonites are not about to apologize for their actions. Quite the contrary, they seek out the Arameans to aid them in their battle against David. David's general, Joab, comes up with a strategy for battle and calls on his followers to "Be strong, and let us be courageous" (II Samuel 10:12). This echoes the call of Joshua to Israel as they are about to enter the promise land (Joshua 1:6-7). The Arameans are defeated by Israel. They flee and in turn the Ammonites follow them (II Samuel 10:14). This however is not the end. The Arameans regroup and come after Israel again. This time they are totally defeated by David. They make peace with Israel and become subject to them (II Samuel 10:19). David is at the peak of his power.

There are two critical lessons in this chapter. The first is that attempts to show compassion and mercy may not be received the way we intend. David wants to show compassion to Hanun on the death of his father. Yet Hanan and his princes completely reverse this by claiming that David is trying to spy on them. We have no assurance that our efforts of compassion will be accepted either. In spite of our best intentions we should not be surprised if those we are trying to help turn on us and make false accusations. There is some truth to the old ironic saying, "no good deed goes unpunished."

The second lesson is that some victories are only temporary. David could not have assumed that the initial defeat of the Ammonites and the Arameans was the end of the battle. The Arameans regroup and attack again. We may experience victory in a spiritual struggle but we can never be complacent. The same temptation or opposition may suddenly reappear again. We need to be like David, ready and vigilant to fight. David takes the initiative. He doesn't wait for the enemy to invade Israel. He crosses

the Jordan and attacks the enemy on their own ground. We need many times to take the initiative in our own struggles. We need to head off the temptation before it overtakes us, trusting like David, in the victory which only the Lord can give (II Samuel 8:14).

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think conflict is an unavoidable part of following the Lord? What does David teach us about how to deal with these conflicts? Why do some battles have to be fought more than once?
2. Why do you think David wants to show kindness to “the house of Saul” for Jonathan’s sake? What does this say about the nature of compassion and forgiveness?
3. How do we respond when our efforts to be kind and caring are misinterpreted or even rejected? What should be our response?

II Samuel 11-12 – “You Are the Man!”

These chapters unfortunately record one of the most pivotal events in David's life. David, the man after God's own heart (I Samuel 13:14) here acts more like a tyrant than God's anointed shepherd king. He takes another man's wife and then conspires quite simply first to cover up his actions and then, what that fails, effectively to commit murder. These crimes efface any of the faults his predecessor, Saul, had. Yet God has chosen David and that will not change (Psalm 89:28-37). Nonetheless, there are serious consequences to David's actions. God says that the sword will never depart from David's house (II Samuel 12:10). David here learns a bitter lesson.

III. “The Woman Was Very Beautiful” – Chapter 11

At the end of chapter 10 we saw David at the peak of his role as King of Israel. He had overcome Israel's enemies and made peace (II Samuel 10:19). As chapter 11 begins the battles continue but David this time does not go (II Samuel 11:1). He sends his general Joab in his place but David remains in Jerusalem. We are not given any reason for David's remaining behind. Was he tired of the constant warfare? But as will be said later, the Ark of the Covenant and the armies of the Lord are on the battle field. David is missing in action.

It is hard to blame David for wanting to pull back after so many conflicts. Yet we can never let our guard down. Paul reminds us that we are in a spiritual war (II Corinthians 10:3-5). We can sense Paul's weariness at having to defend his ministry against the “super-apostles” who in fact were false apostles (II Corinthians 11:5, 13). He lashes out at the Corinthians for putting up with fools (II Corinthians 11:19). He feels forced into speaking like a fool himself to defend his ministry (II Corinthians 11:21). He recounts all he has been through, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks and constant danger, sleepless nights and hunger (II Corinthians 11: 22-29). After all that wouldn't you want to draw back and sit out the next conflict? But Paul can't do that and neither can we. The real issue is that the battle belongs to the Lord (I Samuel 25:28). David who fought so many of those battles for the Lord seemingly has forgotten that fact.

The crisis begins slowly. We are told simply that it was late one afternoon. It seems that David was taking a nap. He rises and is walking on what would in effect be a terrace on the roof. The palace would be higher than the surrounding buildings. David sees a woman bathing. We're told she is very beautiful. David asks who she is. He's told that she is a married woman (II Samuel 11:3). Then we read, “So David sent messengers to get her” (II Samuel 11:4). The Hebrew word translated “get” here means “to take, to seize, to lay hold of.” There is clearly the idea of force here. How did we go from David asking about her to the reference, “So David sent messengers . . .?” Where is the struggle with temptation? What happened to the man after God's own heart? Did we miss something here? David looks and then even after finding out she is a married woman he sends messengers to “get her.” Given the fact that David is the king it would seem that Bathsheba was not in a position to decline his summons.

David's descent is so fast. He falls into sin so readily. What is he thinking? Is he thinking at all? This passage is all about lust. David's not inviting her to a quiet dinner

in the palace. There's apparently only one thing on his mind. David sends for her. She comes to him and "he lay with her" (II Samuel 11:4). Then she returns to her home. David doesn't seem particularly interested in getting to know her. She serves her purpose and then he dispenses with her. It also must be noted that at this point David had multiple wives and concubines (II Samuel 5:13). He could have sent for any one (or more) of them. We are watching God's anointed descend into the depths.

Bathsheba becomes pregnant. David now proceeds to attempt to cover up his sin. The easiest solution is to bring her husband home for a few days so that her pregnancy would appear legitimate. Even this idea however is not so clear headed since if Bathsheba already knew she was pregnant before her husband's return the timing may not add up. David tells Uriah to go to his home and wash his "feet" ("feet" is a euphemism for the genitals, cf. Ruth 3:7). Uriah will not play David's game, however. He points out that the ark and the armies of Israel are in the field so he will not avail himself of the benefits of returning to his home. David keeps trying. He even gets Uriah drunk but all to no avail (II Samuel 11:13).

David then comes up with an insidious idea. He sends a letter back with Uriah instructing Joab to place Uriah in the most intense place of battle and then draw back so Uriah will be defenseless and be killed. Joab doesn't appear to carry out David's instructions so blatantly but the net result is the same. Uriah is killed in battle. David, upon hearing the news, sends the message back to Joab, "Do not let this matter trouble you . . . !?" (II Samuel 11:25). David then sends for Bathsheba after her time of mourning and makes her his wife. It seems that David has wrapped the whole thing up. The chapter however concludes with the words, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (II Samuel 11:27). That has to be one of the most understated verses in all of the Bible.

IV. Nathan's Prophecy" – Chapter 12

Nathan the prophet comes to David armed with a message from the Lord. Nathan appeals to David's sense of justice in telling him in effect a parable of a rich man with many sheep stealing the one lamb belonging to a poor man. David is understandably enraged, whereupon in an intensely dramatic moment, Nathan pronounces, "You are the man!" (II Samuel 12:1-7). He recounts the words of the Lord in listing all that God had done for David in anointing him king over Israel. The devastating conclusion is found in v.9, "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" The irony of this is that David himself has written the "word of the Lord" in so many of his psalms. David is then told that the sword will never depart from his house. There will not only be conflict but indeed violence as the consequence of his actions.

David to his credit and in spite of the enormity of his sin confesses that he has truly "sinned against the Lord" (II Samuel 12:13). God will not annul his promises to David. Yet David by his actions has "utterly scorned the Lord" (II Samuel 12:14). As a result the child of David and Bathsheba will die. Again this is a hard lesson for us. Why should an innocent baby die for David's sin? This though points us to the follow up question, why should the innocent Son of David, the Messiah, die for our sins?

David having confessed and been forgiven (I John 1:9) now prays diligently for the life of the baby's life. It is difficult to read, "The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David and it became very ill" (II Samuel12:15). Sin radiates out in all directions affecting the innocent as well as the guilty. After seven days of intense prayer, the child dies (II Samuel12:18). God's answer to David's prayers is a straightforward no. David's servants are afraid that David may do something desperate when he learns of the child's death. However David accepts the Lord's will and goes on. He makes the summary statement, "I shall go to him but he will not return to me" (II Samuel12:23). One can see an implied reference to eternal life in this comment. David will eventually be reunited with his child.

David and Bathsheba have a second child, Solomon. Solomon's life will be a mixture of positive and negative. Nonetheless he remains under God's promise (Psalm 89:30-34). More importantly, it is through the line of Solomon that Jesus will come (Matthew 1:6-7).

In another ironic twist, the chapter ends with David going back into battle. A message from his general, Joab, alerts him to the battle for the royal city of the Ammonites. Joab says that David can come into the battle or else he will take the city himself. This time David does not hold back. He goes into the fight and secures all the cities of the Ammonites. David returns to Jerusalem but life will never be the same (II Samuel12:29-31).

There is a sober lesson in this story. We can never take our relationship with the Lord for granted. We can rest in the Lord but we can never rest from the Lord. David somehow in a relatively brief moment turned away from God and fell headlong into terrible sin, a sin that cost two lives and set the stage for long term conflict in David's family for years to come. God's original warning to Cain applies to David and truthfully to all of us. "Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). We can never master it in our own strength. In any temptation God provides the way out. We need to always be ready to follow that escape (I Corinthians 10:13).

Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we avoid "spiritual battle fatigue" in our own lives? How can we keep ourselves fresh and alert in serving to the Lord?
2. What lessons can we learn from David's negative example here?
3. What comfort can we take from the fact that God will not cast David off even after his multiple sins?

II Samuel 13-15 – “The Emergence of Absalom”

The story of David's son, Absalom, is one of the most tragic in Scripture. The Bible does not hold back in its description of the judgment that falls on David's house as a result of his sin with Bathsheba (the tragedies of Shakespeare are tame by comparison). There are many books that human beings have written about God. The Bible is the only book God has written about humanity (II Peter 1:20-21). David has created his own hell.

V. Lust and Loathing – chapter 13

The unraveling of David's family begins with one of his sons, Amnon, and his nephew, Jonadab. Amnon quite literally lusts after his half sister, Tamar, who, like Bathsheba, is beautiful. Several things are important to keep in mind as this story unfolds. Amnon as David's oldest son would normally be the heir to his father's throne. The Law of Moses prohibited a man from having sexual relations with even a half sister (Leviticus 18:9). In Amnon's mind then there was no appropriate way he could marry Tamar. Yet he is obsessed with her, so tormented that he made himself ill (II Samuel 13:2). His cousin comes up with an insidious plan, so bold that it seems strange that he was able to carry it out.

Jonadab suggests that Amnon pretend to be sick and request Tamar to come and feed him something. David himself buys into this and sends Tamar to Amnon. When she comes Amnon sends everyone else out of the room. He then literally asks her to feed him. Incredibly, no one seems to have become suspicious as all this was unfolding. Amnon then grabs her and begins to force her. As a last defense she begs Amnon to ask David to give his permission for him to marry her, overriding the prohibition in the law. Amnon however is consumed by lust and rapes her. He may also think that David would make no such exception. At this point though he probably isn't thinking at all.

After the rape he despises her (talk about blaming the victim). She protests his loathing her is worse than the rape. Amnon however forcibly sends her away. She goes to the home of her full brother Absalom who advises her to “be quiet.” David hears about what happens and is very angry but he doesn't do anything because of his love for Amnon, his firstborn son (II Samuel 13:21).

Absalom lays low for two years and then plans his revenge against Amnon. Absalom asks David to allow Amnon to accompany him to shearing the sheep which apparently was a ritual similar to a harvest. David gives his permission! Absalom essentially gets Amnon drunk and then has him killed. The first report that David gets is that Absalom had killed all his brothers. He learns however that this is not the case. Only Amnon has been killed (II Samuel 13:32). Absalom flees to another kingdom and stays there for three years. After his mourning for Amnon David yearns for Absalom (II Samuel 13:39).

David's behavior in all this seems neither credible nor justifiable. What is *he* thinking? David is not at all suspicious of Amnon's initial request. However, when he does learn of the rape he does nothing. Later it doesn't seem to occur to him that there is something questionable about Absalom's wanting Amnon to go on the sheep shearing mission. After Absalom murders his brother he doesn't seem to want to punish Absalom but instead he yearns for him. And what has happened to Tamar except that Absalom names his daughter after her, also a beautiful woman if it matters (and it apparently does to the writer) (II Samuel 14:27)? Tamar's future would seem to be a very empty one. She is no longer a virgin and lives in the home of a brother who has since fled.

What a mess! But it gets worse. . . .

VI. Absalom Plans His Revolt - Chaps. 14-15

In a scene that echoes Nathan's confronting David after his crimes, David's servant Joab arranges to have a woman come to David with a story of one brother killing another who then faces death as a consequence. The woman pleads that she could lose both sons if the murderer is put to death. David agrees and pledges to spare the life of the surviving son. He is then confronted (as he was by Nathan) with the fact that he has condemned himself by having banished Absalom. We are then to conclude that even though David has yearned for Absalom, that Absalom has essentially be banished for having murdered his brother. It would seem that Joab in having arranged this charade is trying to resolve an inner conflict within David who apparently both missed his son and, at the same time, would not allow him to return.

David figures out that Joab has been behind this. The end result is that he has Absalom returned to Jerusalem. David however specifies that Absalom is to be confined to his own house and is not to come into his presence (What has happened to Tamar during this time? We are not told). There are some important things that we learn about Absalom at this point which prepare us for what is to come. First, we are told that Absalom is incredibly good looking and for this he is "praised" (14:25). We also learn that he has long and thick hair which is described as being "heavy on him" (II Samuel 14:26). We are also to infer that Absalom, after the death of his first born brother, Amnon, is next in line for the throne. This idea is not lost on Absalom. David finally relents under the influence of Joab and sends for Absalom and kisses him (II Samuel 14:33). But it is too late. Absalom now plots to overthrow his father.

Absalom does this by ingratiating himself with all the people seeking a judgment from the king. Absalom promises to give everyone a favorable hearing with his statement, "If only I were judge in the land!" (II Samuel 15:4). The writer sums up his strategy with the statement, "so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel" (II Samuel 15:6). After four years Absalom is prepared to act. There is now a full blown conspiracy which leads quickly to civil war. David and his followers, along with the ark of the covenant, plan to flee Jerusalem before Absalom's advancing army. David leaves his household

in the care of ten concubines (II Samuel 15:16). This fact foreshadows more outrage to come.

In a telling scene David ascends the Mount of Olives weeping as he goes (II Samuel 15:30). David learns that one of his counselors, Ahitophel has joined the rebellion of Absalom (II Samuel 15:31). David prays against the plotting of Ahitophel. The chapter ends with David sending his friend Hushai the Archite back to Jerusalem as a spy to learn everything that Absalom and Ahitophel are planning. Hushai enters Jerusalem just as Absalom and his troops arrive in the city (II Samuel 15:37). To be continued . . .

What are we to make of all this? What lessons can we learn from these events? David in these chapters emerges more as a tragic rather than as a sympathetic figure. His failure to act in the rape of Tamar sets the stage for Absalom's bloody revenge. David appears ambivalent about Absalom both yearning for him and refusing to see him even after he returns to his home in Jerusalem (II Samuel 14:24-25). Is this the David who is the man after God's own heart (I Samuel 13:14), the author of many of the Psalms? The answer is yes. At the same time we do not see David seeking after the Lord until he is forced to flee Jerusalem (II Samuel 15:31). David seems distant from the Lord. This is no longer the David to whom the Lord gave victory in all that he did (II Samuel 8:14). This is not only the judgment which Nathan foresaw. David here makes questionable decisions. One of the lessons here is that the more we rely on our own judgment the more trouble we're likely to have (Proverbs 3:5). As a summary of all that is happening we have David's own words, later quoted by the apostle Paul, "there is no one who does good, no, not one" (Psalm 14:3).

Questions for Discussion –

1. At several points in these chapters David appears not to know what to do. Why do you think this is? Have you ever been in a similar situation?
2. Do you see Absalom as a sympathetic or unsympathetic person? Why?
3. Do you see any similarities between David and Jesus on the Mount of Olives (II Samuel 15:30; Luke 22:39-46).

II Samuel 16-18 – “O Absalom My Son!”

These next chapters are full of intrigue and conflict. David has abandoned Jerusalem in the face of Absalom leading a revolt against him. He is hunted and cursed. Yet his allies protect him and to David's great sorrow Absalom is killed. This, however, ends the revolt. Throughout all of this, God is watching over David (II Samuel 18:19).

VII. David's Distress – chapter 16

In a strange encounter David meets Zita a servant of Mephibosheth, Jonathan's crippled son to whom David had shown special kindness (cf. II Samuel chapter 9). Zita here is probably lying for his own advantage implying that Mephibosheth wants to seize the kingdom of Israel for himself (being the grandson of Saul, II Samuel 16:3). David then gives over all of Mephibosheth's possessions to Zita. David will later learn that Zita is not telling the truth. Yet David is in such a distressed state at this point that he probably is not thinking clearly.

David next encounters some relatives of Saul who curse him and throw stones at him and his servants. They end their insults with the dire statement, “See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood!” That accusation is certainly true but it is not the case that the Lord had given the kingdom to Absalom (II Samuel 16:8). In spite of all David's current distress God's promises to him remain true (II Samuel 7:15-16). David is going through terrible trials, much of it of his own doing. Yet God's promises can never be set aside.

Abishai wants to kill this Shimei who is cursing David. Yet David remarkably hears the word of the Lord in the cursing (II Samuel 16:9-11). David still hopes in the Lord. He expresses the hope that God will see his great distress and be good to him (II Samuel 16:12). Shimei's cursing and stone throwing continue until David and his followers arrive “weary at the Jordan.” Yet there they refresh themselves (II Samuel 16:14).

However, not everything is as bad as it appears. David's friend, Hushai the Archite, has ingratiated himself with Absalom. David therefore has a spy in the rebels' camp (II Samuel 16:18-19). Absalom however at this point is depending on the counsel of Ahithophel who betrayed David by coming over to Absalom's side (II Samuel 15:31). Ahithophel's advice now is that Absalom should totally humiliate his father by having sex in public with his father's concubines (II Samuel 16:20-23). This fulfilled one of the judgments that God had placed on David (II Samuel 12:11-12).

VIII. David Counters Absalom's Plans – chapter 17-18

Absalom is following the advice of Ahithophel.. Yet Hushai the Archite is a spy in Absalom's camp and has gained his confidence. Ahithophel recommends going after David immediately, believing him to be “weary and discouraged” (II Samuel 17:2). His plan is to kill only David, not all the people with him. Absalom likes this plan but just to double check he asks the opinion of Hushai the Archite. Hushai cleverly gives Absalom

bad advice. He tells him to delay until he can gather “all Israel” to mount an attack on David and that he himself should lead the assault. Absalom and his followers are more impressed with the advice of Hushai than that of Ahithophel. The narrator tells us that this was God’s plan to bring about the defeat of Absalom (II Samuel 17:14). Hushai then sends word to David advising him of Absalom’s plans. David’s two servants who serve as his spies, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, receive the information as planned from a servant girl. However they are seen and they hide themselves in the well of an ally. When Absalom’s servants come looking for the spies they are told that they have left (II Samuel 17:20).

When David gets the word he prepares a counter attack. He crosses the Jordan and lies in wait for Absalom and his followers. His allies come and bring him supplies. Meanwhile, Ahithophel is apparently so distraught at his advice not being taken that he goes to his home and commits suicide (II Samuel 17:23)! Meanwhile Absalom places Amasa, Joab’s cousin, over the army of Israel (the followers of Judah remain loyal to David). He then sets out to destroy David.

David and his men are lying in wait for Absalom and his army. David’s soldiers prevail upon him not to go into the battle. They insist that it would be too dangerous and they say to him, “But you are worth ten thousand of us, therefore it is better that you send us help from the city” (II Samuel 18:3). David gives in to their concerns. His final word to his troops as they leave for battle is “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom (II Samuel 18:5).”

Absalom’s army is no match for David’s soldiers who wipe out the rebellious followers of Absalom in a bloody battle (II Samuel 18:7). Absalom himself is riding on a mule and his head is caught in a giant oak (there has been speculation that it is Absalom’s thick hair that is caught in the oak but that is not what the text says). Joab, David’s general, hears of it from a man who witnessed the event. Joab immediately asks why the man himself did not kill the helpless Absalom. In an echo of what David said earlier about Saul the man says he did not dare to kill the king’s son. Joab and his armor bearers have no such compunction. They thrust their spears into Absalom and kill him. His body then is thrown into a deep pit in the forest (II Samuel 18:17).

The narrator builds some suspense in this section by detailing how two different messengers are sent to tell David the news about Absalom. David recognizes the first messenger, Ahimaaz son of Zadok whom he describes as a “good man.” However Ahimaaz, perhaps fearing David’s reaction, does not tell him that Absalom is dead. Joab had told Ahimaaz not to go to David but he insisted. In any event he only tells David that he saw a “great tumult” (II Samuel 18:29). The second messenger then comes and tells David, in response to his question, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” that, in effect, Absalom is dead (II Samuel 18:32). David is overcome with grief and cries out, “O my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would I had died instead of you” (II Samuel 18:33).

David has now borne the full effects of God’s judgment for his crime against Uriah and Bathsheba. Absalom is dead. He is no longer the heir to the throne. David’s successor will be Solomon who maintains the line out of which Jesus will come.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What lesson can we learn from David's both accepting rebuke as part of God's judgment and, at the same time, trusting in the Lord to repay him with goodness (II Samuel 16:9-12)?
2. What do you make of Absalom? Is he an enemy or not?
3. Why do you think David still cares so much for Absalom?

II Samuel 19-21 – “David’s New Challenges”

David continues to mourn for Absalom, to the point that his general Joab rebukes him. David makes a number of surprising choices in these chapters, rejecting some of his allies and bestowing favor on enemies. David finds himself to be a dividing point between the loyalty of Judah and the other tribes of Israel. This is another traumatic period in David’s life marked by violence and the implied presence of other gods.

IX. David Regains the Throne – chapter 19

Following the death of Absalom the rebellion ends (for the time being) and David is able to return to his home in Jerusalem. Yet he continues to mourn for Absalom to the point that his victory is turned into mourning (II Samuel 19:2). His general, Joab, confronts him with the contradiction that David seems to be loving those who hate him and hating those who love him (II Samuel 19:5-6). He urges David to go out to the city gate and “speak kindly” to his servants (II Samuel 19:7). David does so. However the people of Israel seem remarkably undecided. They had supported Absalom yet they remember how David had delivered them from their enemies (II Samuel 19:9-10).

David sends word to the elders of Judah through the priests Zadok and Abiathar regarding his return. David then takes the drastic step of appointing his nephew Amasa as his chief commander instead of Joab. The irony is that Amasa had served under Absalom (II Samuel 17:25). Amasa now sways the hearts of the people of Judah toward David (II Samuel 19:14-15). David may well have resented Joab’s criticisms over his mourning of Absalom.

David now proceeds to reconcile himself with a number of key people leading up to his being recognized finally as king by all of Israel and not just the tribe of Judah. Shimei, the relative of Saul, who had cursed David earlier now comes seeking his forgiveness (II Samuel 16:5-8; II Samuel 19:16-20). Abishai, Joab’s brother, tells David to kill Simei for his having cursed David. This however is not David’s intention. David in fact responds with the rhetorical question, “Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day?” (II Samuel 19:22). David here is a model of forgiveness.

David next reconciles with Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth. David had been misled earlier by Mephibosheth’s servant Ziba (II Samuel 16:1-5). He now seeks to rectify the situation by dividing Saul’s estate between the two of them (II Samuel 19: 24-30). We next read of David encountering an aged supporter, Barzillai the Gileadite. David wants Barzillai to accompany him to Jerusalem as he returns to reclaim his throne. Barzillai, who is eighty years old, pleads that he is too old for the trip and offers one of his servants in his place, Chimham (II Samuel 19:31-38). David then kisses Barzillai and goes on his way accompanied by all the people of Judah and half the people of Israel.

In a final scene the rest of the Israelites come to David and pledge their support to him. However it is clear that here is a rivalry between the tribes of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This will eventually lead to two separate kingdoms. For the time being however they are united under David.

X. Joab Reclaims His Leadership – chapter 20

No sooner has David returned to Jerusalem than he faces another rebellion, possibly worse than that led by Absalom. This time it is a “scoundrel” named Sheba. The people of Israel who had just expressed their devotion to David here quickly turn away and follow Sheba (II Samuel 20:1-2). It is disturbing to see how quickly the devotion of the crowds can change. We see the same thing in Jesus’ ministry.

David returns to his home in Jerusalem under the shadow of another conflict. He provides for the ten concubines who had been raped by Absalom but avoids them so that they live out their lives as widows (II Samuel 20:3). David now prepares for battle against Sheba. Amasa, now David’s general, assembles the troops. Joab’s soldiers also go out in pursuit. Joab has not forgotten, much less forgiven, David’s affront in putting Amasa in charge of the army in his place (II Samuel 19:13). When Joab meets up with Amasa he comes over to him to greet him with a kiss. But Joab has a sword concealed under his belt. The sword falls out but Amasa does not notice it. Joab then stabs Amasa in the stomach (II Samuel 20:4-10). Amasa does not die right away but in a gruesome scene is left “wallowing in his blood” (II Samuel 20:12). He dies soon after and Joab and his men go off in pursuit of Sheba

Joab and his forces track down Sheba. Sheba is held up in the city of Abel. We read that a “wise woman” from the city comes to Joab with a proposition. She basically asks Joab to spare the city and promises that the city will turn over the head of Sheba. Joab readily agrees (II Samuel 20:14-22). He has nothing against the city of Abel per se. He simply wants Sheba and apprehending him will presumably increase his stature in David’s eyes. In this violent world the inhabitants of Abel cut off Sheba’s head and turn it over to Joab. Joab then solidifies his role as commander of “all the army of Israel” (II Samuel 20: 23).

XI. Echoes of the Pagan Past – chapter 21

This is a strange section to put it mildly. We appear to be back in the ancient religions of the nations who had been driven out of Canaan. There is a famine in the land. This was the greatest danger faced by ancient peoples. David inquires of the Lord and learns that there is unatoned for guilt on the part of Saul’s family (II Samuel 21:1). Saul apparently had put the Gibeonites to death. They were a remnant of the Amorites who, nonetheless, had been promised that they would be spared (II Samuel 21:2). Saul had attacked them in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. This zeal though had been misplaced.

David then speaks to the Gibeonites and asks what can be done to “make expiation.” Expiation is a major term. It refers to the wiping out of sin. This was the promise of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) which was finally fulfilled in the cross of Christ (Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 9). To accomplish this, the king of the Gibeonites asks that seven of Saul’s descendents be handed over to be impaled! David agrees to this with the provision that Mephibosheth be spared (II Samuel 21:7). Seven others are impaled and this takes place on the first day of the harvest suggesting that their deaths somehow will help the harvest. This harks back to the ancient pagan practices of the

religions of the region such as the annual return from the dead of Tammuz to insure the success of the yearly harvest (Ezekiel 8:14).

One of Saul's daughters, Rizpah, tries to protect the bodies of her brothers from the vultures at least until the rains come which again was part of the ancient expectation of these sacrifices. David, apparently motivated by her devotion, goes and reclaims the bones of Saul and Jonathan which had fallen into the hands of the people of Jabesh-gilead from where the Philistines had left them in the city of Bethshan (their armor had been sacrificed to the goddess Astarte (I Samuel 31:10).

This chapter concludes with an equally strange account of David and his men fighting giants among the Philistines. Apparently Goliath wasn't the only one. Giants are mentioned in Genesis 6:1-4 as the Nephilim who were also present in the promise land (Numbers 13:30-33). David's men prevail upon him to stay back from the battle especially since one of the giants is after him (II Samuel 21:16-17). People have been puzzled by the reference to the reference of one Elhanan killing Goliath. In a parallel text the giant is identified as the brother of Goliath (I Chronicles 20:5). That is probably what is meant here. The passage ends with the defeat of the giants.

This whole section has an overlay of mythology to it. We have echoes of pagan practices such as sacrificing people to insure the harvest (compare the unforgettable 1973 film *The Wicker Man*). There is also the presence of giants. In addition we have several examples of sheer brutality in the murder of Amasa, the beheading of Sheba and the impaling of the descendents of Saul. In the kingdom of David, the man after God's own heart, we see the continuing influence of these pagan realities. All we can say is that this is a world that desperately needs Jesus Christ. There are similar conflicts in the New Testament involving pagan priestesses and magicians but there the gospel is present as the antidote (I Corinthians 6:12-20; Acts 8:9-24). We need to remember that apart from Jesus Christ the world can be a very brutal place.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What can we learn from David's efforts at reconciliation with Shimei and Mephibosheth?
2. What do you make of Joab? Is his brutality part of his loyalty to David or is it his own personal ambition? Is Joab a case of the end justifying the means?
3. What lessons can we learn from the brutal realities of the impaling of Saul's descendents and the war against the giants? How is the impaling in particular a sacrifice to the Lord (21:6)?

II Samuel 22-24 – The Last Words of David

This concluding section of II Samuel is a compilation of several sources. We begin with Psalm 18 which goes back to David's earlier conflicts with Saul. This is followed by David's actual "last words" (II Samuel 23:1-7). We then have a list of David's warriors who are a central "Three," followed by a next group of thirty seven. The section ends with David committing another grave sin in counting the people. Yet David remains God's anointed (II Samuel 22:51).

XII. "For who is God, but the Lord" – II Samuel Chapter 22; Psalm 18

This quote from the Book of Psalms repeats one of David's great statements of faith in God. The recurring motif he uses of the Lord is "my rock" (II Samuel 22:3, 32, 47). Yet there are limitations to this psalm of faith. David at the point when he wrote this psalm had not fully encountered the "steadfast love" of the Lord. In this psalm the young David is too confident, almost proud.

He begins by praising God for being saved from his enemies (II Samuel 22:4). He acknowledges that he came close to death which we have seen in the fact that Saul was out to kill him (II Samuel 22:5-7). His trust is in a God who exhibits power and strength. Before God the earth reels (II Samuel 22:8). He descends to earth with fire and smoke and in "thick darkness" (II Samuel 22:9-12). David emphasizes that God is not passive in our distress. He is mighty in coming to our rescue. He delivers us from our "strong enemy" (II Samuel 22:18). His enemy (Saul) was too strong for David. But the Lord intervened and brought him "out into a broad place" (II Samuel 22:18-20). David's confidence and hope in the Lord both inspires and strengthens us in the conflicts and struggles that we face. He acknowledges that God delivered him because he delighted in him (II Samuel 22:20).

David's next section however is weaker. David sees himself as being rewarded for his righteousness. His claim that he was blameless and guiltless seems like a boast (II Samuel 22:24-25). David here may be setting himself up for his major sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. Yet, even here, David continues to express a dynamic faith. He states that God's way is perfect, his promises prove true and he is a shield for all who take refuge in him (II Samuel 22:31).

David's great faith in God goes along with his celebrating the destruction of his enemies. They were left without any hope. They cried out to the Lord but God did not answer them (II Samuel 22:38-42). This is an example of what is known as the "Imprecatory psalms." They express vengeance and celebrate the destruction of the psalmist's enemies. They seem more than a little difficult to us. There is no hint here of forgiveness or grace. Their spirit is found in Zechariah's dying curse (II Chronicles 24:22) and in the horrific picture of infants being dashed against rocks (Psalm 137:9). What are we to make of this? Yet, even though we are reading of God's anointed and his prophets, this is still the world of the law. This is the ultimate "an eye for an eye"

(Leviticus 24:18-20). David points forward to the Messiah, but this is still a world without the gospel.

XIII. David's Final Statement – 23:1-7

David's closing words, spoken long after Psalm 18, nonetheless show a similar spirit. David, however, here trusts in his election by God not in his righteousness (cf. II Samuel 22:21). His hope is in God's everlasting covenant not in any claim to be blameless (II Samuel 23:5). Yet David still speaks in terms of the justice of the law. The ruler is to be just, "ruling in the fear of God" (II Samuel 23:3). David hopes for the prosperity of the Lord (II Samuel 23:5). At the same time he condemns the godless. They are to be "entirely consumed in fire" (II Samuel 23:6-7).

There is no hope expressed here of the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord. There is only God's righteous standard and those who do not follow it are without hope. In the next chapter we read of David's trusting in the mercy of God. However, there is no mention of mercy here, certainly not for the "godless." This raises the question, are these really the "last words" of David? The story of David continues beyond this point. We don't know the exact chronology, but it appears that God has to test David with a final temptation so that he begins to learn more of God's mercy.

XIV. The Anger and the Mercy of God – II Samuel 23:8-24:25

We next have a listing of David's warriors. There are three that are the main leaders, Josheb-basshebeth, Eleazar and finally Shammah. In addition to these three there are thirty seven other commanders. One of whom, ironically, is Uriah the Hittite. We have a touching story of how David while hiding in a cave from the Philistines expressed a longing for water from a well in his home city of Bethlehem. Three of his chiefs, at great risk, make their way to Bethlehem and bring back some of the water for David. David, very moved however, will not drink it. He pours it on the ground saying, "Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" (II Samuel 23:17).

After a listing of all of David's commanders we have both a disturbing and puzzling account of God's anger. God is angry with Israel (II Samuel 24:1). We are not told the reason. We can imagine it relates to Israel's frequent worshipping of false gods (I Sam. 8:8). God then *incites* David to count the people of Israel. There are numerous questions here. First, David in effect is conducting a census. Yet, this is regarded by both the Lord and him as a great sin. Questions have been raised literally for centuries as to why this was a sin. The consensus seems to be that it is an example of not trusting in the Lord, somehow depending on one's material resources, rather than spiritual, resources. Second, God incites David to do this. In the parallel account in I Chronicles 21:1 it states that Satan was the one who incited David. We know from the Book of Job (chapters 1-2) that Satan can only act with God's permission.

This raises numerous other questions. Why does God allow Satan to act? Why is David being incited to commit this "sin?" One reason would seem to be that God tests us to see what is in our heart (Deuteronomy 8:2). James makes a distinction between God testing us (which he does) and tempting us (which he does not do) (James 1:2-4,

12-16). We can only say that God allows us to be tempted so that we can be tested. James adds,

“Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” (James 1:12).

To quote the disciples in John 6:60, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

The answer somehow lies in the fact that God takes us seriously. We have freedom of choice even with our perverse hearts (Jeremiah 17:9). God wants to know if we are serious about loving and serving him. So he tests us. This reality is the antidote to the simplistic idea that God only blesses us and takes care of us. He *does* bless us and take care of us. But he also tests us. David, the man after God's own heart, was being continually tested. He failed the test with Bathsheba. He fails this one too.

Joab objects to David's order. He knows it's wrong. He's been down this road before (II Samuel 11:14-21). Nonetheless, like a good soldier, he follows the order. After the census, David is struck with his sin and cries out to the Lord (II Samuel 24:10). A prophet gives David the word of the Lord. He has three options for punishment, three years of famine, three months being pursued by his enemies or three days of pestilence (II Samuel 24:12-13). David cannot choose and in one of his great statements cries out, “let us fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is great” (II Samuel 24:14). In the midst of this judgment David sees the mercy of God. This may have been the lesson that David needed to learn.

God sends a pestilence for three days and seventy thousand people die! God stays the hand of the angel of death from destroying Jerusalem (II Samuel 24:16). David takes full responsibility for the sin and prays that God will spare the people (II Samuel 24:17). God then tells David to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (II Samuel 24:18). The significance of this will become clear later when we learn that this will be the site of Solomon's temple (II Chronicles 3:1). David builds the altar and the plague comes to an end (II Samuel 24:25).

Questions for Discussion –

1. Do you see David boasting in Psalm 18? Do our prayers sometimes fall into the trap of being subtle boasts about ourselves?
2. Why do you think God incites David to count the people when this is apparently a sin?
3. How is this an example of the mercy of God? Do we sometimes have too shallow a view of this mercy?