The Sum of It All

"Now he [David] was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him.' . . . And the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:12-13).

Week 15, Day 1

1 SAMUEL 26–28

As we expected, Saul pursues David again, in spite of his penitent pledge; he is a possessed man, and pledges and honor go the way of all rational issues. Again, David refuses to take advantage of his opportunity to destroy Saul: "The LORD forbid that I should raise my hand against the LORD's anointed" (26:11).

Not that David was perfect. His relationship with King Achish is very pragmatic and self-serving, and he seems to think little of deceiving a man who obviously trusts him. But in the issue of Saul, at what was the core of David's life, he kept the faith.

Meanwhile Saul becomes an increasingly pathetic figure. He needs guidance in his kingship; and with Samuel gone, he is at a loss, especially since he receives no answer from God or from the customary channels of divine communication. At last he turns to a medium, even though he himself has previously outlawed them. The woman to whom he goes is apparently startled by her own success in raising the spirit of Samuel. Samuel offers not solace but a more desolate picture, telling Saul that the Lord has become his enemy.

Now Saul falls in terror, destroyed by his own ambition and seemingly forsaken by God. Whatever her character, the medium becomes at this point a source of mercy for Saul, offering him common sense, food, and a measure of sensitive kindness.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, when I see someone who seems beaten by life and forsaken, make me a messenger of your love; in Jesus' name. Amen.

What explanation do you find—and don't be too quick on this—for Saul's contradictory and irrational conduct in these chapters?

Week 15, Day 2

1 SAMUEL 29–31

David himself is passing through a series of trials at this time. He is rejected by the commanders of the Philistine army and leaves with a measure of fear for his life. Then the people of Ziklag turn on him, threatening to stone him (30:6). But there is a profound difference between David's circumstances and Saul's. Saul was without divine sustenance, "but David strengthened himself in the LORD his God" (30:6). In one of the psalms attributed to David he cries, "Do not take your holy spirit from me" (51:11). One can endure any of life's buffeting if only there is the assurance that God is still at hand.

But for Saul, the end has come. His three sons, including Jonathan, are killed in battle, and Saul himself is shot by an archer. With ethnic and religious pride, he calls upon his armor-bearer to take what remains of his life, so that "these uncircumcised" will not be able to make sport of him.

One cannot come to the end of Saul's story without feeling deep sorrow for the tragedy of his life. He had so much going for him at the outset, including the anointing of God's spirit and a very real humility. But he wasted his resources in a fascination with power and then with fear of one he perceived to be his rival; for whenever anyone becomes absorbed with power, he or she will inevitably, eventually become obsessed with threats, real and imagined, of losing that power.

PRAYER: Like David, O Lord, I would pray: Whatever may happen, take not your Holy Spirit from me; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Compare qualities of leadership and character as demonstrated by David and Saul in 1 Samuel 30–31.

Week 15, Day 3

2 SAMUEL 1–3; PSALM 62

Now the anointing that David received as a boy in Bethlehem has become effective; he is the king of Israel. In truth, most of the tribes will not swing their loyalty to him for another seven years, but there can be no doubt now about the eventual outcome.

These chapters offer us a mixture of heroism and violence and sometimes both in the same instance. They are unvarnished reports, largely without comment; what you see is what you get. The Bible acknowledges us as we are: raw material—sometimes exceedingly raw!—with which God works. Such is the stuff with which heaven must achieve its goals.

So we see David's extraordinary loyalty to Saul and Jonathan, even in their death, by his harsh treatment of the Amalekite messenger (1:1-16). The elegy for the two men is a masterpiece of human affection, and David's treatment of the people of Jabesh-gilead translates the poetry into deeds. But the violence of the times reappears in the senseless army games at the pool of Gibeon, where young life is made very cheap (2:12-16). And when Abner defects to David over sexual accusations and palace intrigue (3:6-11), the story line is a little like a contemporary tabloid.

Abner is a fascinating character. He tries to spare young Asahel's life, knowing he has him over-matched; but he is a tough negotiator and promises David he will bring round the reluctant tribes. Yet wise as he is, he dies "as a fool dies" (3:33), neglecting simple caution.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, our world seems still to be a mixture of kindness and violence; help me always to be on the side of good. Amen.

List several qualities of David's character, negative or positive, that you find in his responses to people and to problems in these chapters.

Week 15, Day 4

2 SAMUEL 4–6

Is it ever proper to use evil means to reach a good end? David didn't think so; so when two young men assassinated Ishbaal in order to clear the way for David to take leadership of all the tribes, he responded with the same anger he had shown seven years before at the news of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths (4:5-12). In this matter, there was no gray area in David's thinking.

Now he began to solidify his power. Along the way, something special seems to have happened in his thinking, apparently when Hiram was building him a house in the new capital of Jerusalem. The writer puts it this way: "David then perceived that the LORD had established him king over Israel" (5:12). Life has such moments, long after formal procedures are past, when one at last "feels" what the document says.

But the best was yet to come. Israel could never feel she was fully the nation she was intended to be as long as the ark of the covenant was in enemy hands. Winning it back from the Philistines was only half the struggle, however; getting it safely to Jerusalem proved more difficult. A certain reverence was required, and poor Uzzah apparently failed it. But when at last the ark entered Jerusalem, David led the way, dancing "before the LORD with all his might" (6:14). His wife Michal was offended by his conduct; perhaps as a king's daughter she had always seen David as a crude shepherd, but especially she seemed to lack the spiritual depth that could sense the glory of a high and holy occasion.

PRAYER: Grant me the freedom, O Lord, of a dancing heart. Amen.

David's dance for the return of the ark was obviously more than ritual or art; what place does sheer exuberance have in our worship?

Week 15, Day 5

2 SAMUEL 7–9

The Bible is a book of covenants. We acknowledge that fact each time we refer to the Old and New Testaments (Covenants), but we rarely consider the wonder that is implicit in such an idea—that the God of the universe would enter a contractual agreement with members of his creation. In Chapter 7 the covenant relationship enters a new phase as God responds to David's desire to build a house of worship by telling him that his throne "shall be established forever" (7:16). This covenant will later have continuing significance for Christians as they see it fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Next to seeking after God, perhaps what David does best is to wage war. So he defeats the Philistines, Moabites, and King Hadadezer of Zobah—"the LORD gave victory to David wherever he went" (8:6). And with it all, he "administered justice and equity to all his people" (8:15). David seemed to have an almost fierce sense of justice, and his people trusted him.

At last that sense of justice expressed itself in fulfilling the vow he had made to Jonathan so many years before. "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (9:1). Mephibosheth was located, a son who had been crippled years before during the days following Saul's and Jonathan's deaths (4:4). David now repays an old debt of friendship, providing a place for Mephibosheth at the royal table all the days of his life (9:10).

PRAYER: Remind me today, O Lord, of any old debt of kindness that I ought to repay and help me to pursue it; in Jesus' name. Amen.

What is your understanding of the promise God makes to David in 2 Samuel 7?

Week 15, Day 6

2 SAMUEL 10–12; PSALM 63

David the public figure continues to pile victory on victory, sometimes in battle and sometimes through diplomacy, including diplomacy that was rejected (10:1-19). But in his private life, David was not doing as well. He had accumulated a large family of wives and concubines (5:13-16), a fact that would eventually be a source of trouble; but now he erred even more dramatically.

It happened in an idle moment, when from his rooftop he saw Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, bathing. Instead of turning from the temptation ("flee" is the word Paul used [1 Corinthians 6:18, NIV]), he pursued it, adding sin upon sin—adultery, deception, murder.

It looked as if he were getting by with his crimes, but "the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (11:27). In pagan empires the king might be a law unto himself, but not in Israel. The prophet Nathan delivers God's judgment. I'm sure it was a painful assignment, partly because Nathan loved David and perhaps also because he may have wondered if David had become so captive to the power syndrome that he might not readily receive a message of judgment.

But David accepted the judgment and repented. Here we see why David, the decidedly imperfect man, is nevertheless a person after God's own heart. Since we humans sin, we had better know how to repent. David did. And God, in mercy, granted a new chance—Solomon (12:24-25).

PRAYER: Since I know not how to be perfect in my living, O Lord, teach me how to be perfect in my repenting; for Christ's sake. Amen.

What lessons are to be learned (1) from David's sin and (2) from his repentance?

Week 15, Day 7

2 SAMUEL 13–15

But the problems of David's private life have not ended. The seeds of trouble that were sown in his many marriages now begin coming to fruit in the tangled relationships of his children. First there is the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, then, two years later, Absalom's murder of Amnon in his sister's revenge.

Absalom may well have been the most able of David's sons, and apparently he was something of his father's favorite. Now they were alienated by the murder; but at last through Joab's artful intervention, Absalom returns to Jerusalem. But still a distance remains between the men, largely at David's end. Perhaps this is an instance where David cannot find a middle ground between his sense of legal rightness and personal caring; and since both those elements are so strong in his nature, the tension is fierce.

Now Absalom begins a campaign. Handsome ("from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him" [14:25]), clever, aggressive, he orchestrated a program that would have done a modern political public relations firm proud. Slowly and steadily he won to himself numbers of those persons who were easily convinced that they were suffering injustice; he "stole the hearts of the people of Israel" (15:6). Then he brought together some members of his father's staff, and when the time was ripe, he announced a coup, driving his father out.

PRAYER: Help us to see, O Lord, that when we fail those who are closest to us, the harm may in time reach far into the human family. Amen.

I think Absalom is the son most like his father David. What basis might I have for thinking so?

Prayer Time

It is time to examine our hearts, to see what sin we hide or justify. This should be a hopeful, cleansing exercise, not a morbid one.

How the Drama Develops 1 SAMUEL 26—2 SAMUEL 15

No personality in either the Old Testament or the New is as fully revealed to us as David, the shepherd who became Israel's most beloved king. We see him in all his remarkable goodness and his shocking badness. Sometimes a person's character is described as being "fatally flawed." David's is dramatically flawed but not fatally. I am astonished at how many times his life comes to the brink of disaster yet recovers.

Probably one of his greatest strengths is his willingness to be corrected. Take the instance of Nabal (1 Samuel 25). In his anger, David is ready to destroy Nabal's entire household; but when Abigail reasons with him, David changes his mind. When David badly bungles his relationship to Absalom (2 Samuel 14), he accepts Joab's counsel—although, I fear, too late. And, of course, in the memorable instance of Bathsheba and Uriah, David bows in humility and repentance when the prophet Nathan confronts him. David does indeed commit sins, and he is full-scale human in so many of his deeds. But he is also ready to receive direction and correction. And from a human point of view, that was probably his salvation.

He must have been a most effective leader. There must have been a contagion in his daring, else Saul and his troops never would have let the young shepherd represent them against Goliath. Then, when he was exiled by Saul and was still such a young man, he was able to gather around himself some four hundred men—people who were "in distress, . . . in debt, and . . . discontented" (1 Samuel 22:2). I'd hate to try to hold such a motley group together! Yet somehow David

managed to keep their loyalty, even at a time when they were ready to stone him (30:1-6).

But great as was his achievement with his band of adventurers, it would still be a huge step from there to becoming king. But again, David was up to the job. Not that all his decisions were wise or all his conduct circumspect. In fact, his greatest achievements may have been in his recovering from his own sins and errors of judgment. But that's not an ability to be smiled at. It may rank near the top in the list of qualities essential to success. Everyone sins, and at times everyone does foolishly; it's what we do after our sins and our stupidities that makes all the difference.

Who would have guessed, the day David was called in from the flocks to meet the venerable Samuel, that such genius was wrapped up in the ruddy shepherd boy? Handsome, yes, and bright-eyed. But someday a king? And such a memorable king that the revived nation would put your symbol, the star of David, on its flag twenty-five centuries later? Not likely! Not once in ten million times.

Remember that there is no achievement in life that really matters unless it can pass the bar of eternity, and no success that succeeds unless it is honorable in God's sight.

—From The Thirteen Apostles (2002,
2012); page 91.

The biblical writers found the answer in God and God's purposes. David was anointed by Samuel when Samuel himself—wise as he was—was ready to anoint his older brothers. And flawed as his character often was, David never forgot what for him was life's center—the will of God. He challenged Goliath because the Philistines were blaspheming God. He would not kill Saul when he had the opportunity (and perhaps, justification) to do so, because to do so would be to break God's Law. He was, indeed, a person after God's own heart. He wanted God.

Seeing Life Through Scripture

Next to the Goliath story, David is probably best known for his sin with Bathsheba. It isn't just the movie-makers and novelists who have made it so, though it isn't surprising they have laid claim on the story. Nor do we read it simply because we are lascivious. We are drawn to this story because it is our own smaller sins—our lusts and desires, our fantasies and deceits—written large. If a man after God's own heart could sin so tragically, then who is exempt? And if he could recover, how did he do it?

That is, how do we cope with sin? Sin is the second surest fact of our universe and the most troubling fact of our lives. How do we handle the fact of sin? That calls for a full-scale treatise, of course, but I offer two matters for your pondering. First, David recognized what he had done. On the surface, that's easier when the sins are adultery and murder; we're slower to see our less obvious and petty sins. But therein is the mark of the saint—to see sin in oneself and to confess it. And then, to recognize that God is the issue in our sins. Not my reputation, not what the sin does to hurt me, not the getting caught, but that I have violated something eternal, something having to do with the very character of God. David knew that, and showed it in the language attributed to him in Psalm 51. And therein lay something of the secret of his spiritual greatness.

Week 15 Reading Schedule

TEPHILLAH
APOSTOLIC CENTRE
The Place Where Prayer Prevails