

Notes on II Samuel 13–24

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Chapter 13–14

The stories that follow describe the sure but troubled progress of David's reign. Unbridled desires and ambitions raged in his own family, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Nathan. As tragic as all these things were, they served to expose still further the grace that had secured for David a future and a hope.

Amnon, David's oldest son, recklessly gratified his lusts. Absalom, a son by a foreigner from Geshur, calculated a course to gain revenge and, probably, power. Both could argue that their father had lusted and acted violently to gain personal ends, but then, they did not fear God as their father did, and they did not repent.

After Tamar was raped she suggested marriage with her father's permission, though this would have broken the Mosaic law (Lev. 18:9, 11; 20:17; Deut. 27:22). However, her protest when attacked shows that certain things were despised in a royal court shaped by the law of God.

Absalom preferred to deal with his sister's tragedy himself rather than bring it to his father. Perhaps he was glad for a legitimate reason to kill Amnon and smooth his path to the throne. David did nothing, but Absalom judged his time and avenged his sister. He made no attempt to kill the other brothers and fled to his mother's country. David, strangely, did not verify the false report that all his sons were dead. Strangely, also, though he grieved, he did not fear for his throne. He was living with the promise concerning his reign, but also, with the judgements that were to come on his household. Perhaps it was during these days that David thought about which of his sons would succeed him.

We have already been told that God loved Solomon. Here we are told that David longed for Absalom. It appears that matters of state may have begun to suffer because of his inaction and Joab saw the need to resolve matters. Joab, while mindful of his own interests, nonetheless, understood David's nature and even his calling and had secured David's best interests on numbers of occasions. His plan to appeal to David by a wise lady's story telling succeeded.

Nathan had used a parable earlier to awaken David to the law of God. Here, Joab's story in the mouth of the wise lady probably represented a popular attitude, that God would provide an inheritance for each family regardless of their keeping his law. The Tekoan lady accused David of guilt for not returning a banished son. David would secure this for her; why not for himself?

Absalom was popular and his return would have been welcomed, but he needed his father's approval to further his ambitions. To get to him, he knew he would have to work through Joab, and even getting his compliance took some drastic action. But he

gained his end, and boldly proclaimed that if his father could find fault with him he should kill him forthwith. David kissed his son but the heart of his son was cold.

David's natural affections were understandable enough, but they could not control the purpose of God. As always, the child of promise and of grace would be the successor (Rom. 9:6–16; Gal. 4:28–31). The wrath of an Absalom could not fulfil the purpose of God (James 1:20). The heir of David's throne would be a man of peace (I Chron. 22:9), and he would be established by God.

Compare the affections of Paul for Israel; they flowed in the direction of God's election (Rom. 9:1–5).

Prayer

Father, we are amazed that in the midst of our sinful race, you established David as king over Israel and taught him to love you and to lead your people in faith and hope. Yet he sinned, and died. We now acknowledge your Son Jesus as Lord and King, for he has brought to light the hidden things of darkness, he has made an end of our sins by his cross and established a kingdom of righteousness. We know no other Lord but him and thank you that he will lead us in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 15–16

Under royal protection, Absalom played the generous prince, building up the idea that he, rather than his father, could administer the realm. After four years of this, he judged that the time was ripe for a coup d'etat.

David had prior reason to be suspicious of Absalom's proposals (13:24–27), and now, must have wondered why Absalom had become so pious four years after God had answered his prayer. Why take two hundred people to share the 'worship' with him? Did he want to leave the impression with his father that, even in Jerusalem, he had loyal supporters? Absalom had virtually signalled what he intended to do, especially as he chose David's former capital for his destination. Absalom had plenty of support, gaining, as anyone can readily do, from disaffected parts of the realm, and perhaps, particularly from Hebron since they had been discarded as the capital when David conquered Jerusalem.

News that most of his subjects had joined Absalom's bid for the throne persuaded David that he should leave Zion. The city could not be easily defended in a civil war and he left it in haste. (It is thought that he penned Psalm three at this time.) His personal bodyguard probably consisted largely of foreigners, a common practice among ancient kings, men thought to be above matters of local politics. Here, they could do no more than entrust themselves to David's judgement.

David left via the Kidron Valley, as Jesus did on his exit from Jerusalem (John 18:1). At various stops in the flight, David was met with loyal people offering assistance and, with these people, guided by his hope that he would again live in the favour of God, his plans were made. He received the pledged loyalty of a recent foreigner, Ittai (cf. Luke 7:9). He rejected the assumption that the ark had to travel with him; rather, he would wait for God to bring him back to Jerusalem; the loyal priests could act as his secret agents. He wept, as Jesus, later, would weep, thinking how he would love to have gathered Israel to the true worship of God (Luke 13:34). How bitter to lose

Ahithophel, supreme among military counsellors, but God would frustrate his advice. Psalm 41:9 may be a reference to this incident, the same Psalm as is used to describe the treachery of Judas in John 13:18. Then, David was met by Hushai by whom Ahithophel would be foiled, and David sent him back to Jerusalem. All these plans were a movement of love, and done in faith and hope because David had no power to secure their outcome.

Ziba's story about Mephibosheth was probably not true, but David, in his weakened situation and encouraged by the gift, acted hastily. The inheritance had to be renegotiated later.

Shimei's embittered false accusations must have stung David as much as they stung his mighty men. The blood he had shed was that of Israel's enemies. But David had learned not to take personal vengeance. Like Jesus, he had to restrain his servants (Luke 9:54). David was willing to endure their taunts as from God, if perchance, he may also receive good from the Lord. Shimmei did not understand the nature of the kingdom of God, and did not have the meekness that would inherit all things. David could not be a witness to the coming reign of Christ unless his reign endured the hostility of those who hated God, and unless he trusted in God for a 'resurrection'.

So, Absalom occupied Jerusalem. Ahithophel gave politically astute advice to his new master, and so, abused the trust David had put in him. He had learned to be heeded as though he was God himself. On the other hand, Hushai lied, but was true to his friend David, and to the Lord who had anointed him. Absalom had demonstrated that he was his father's enemy. The decisive action was intended to galvanise opposition to David and secure his reign.

Prayer

Lord, what can we say when it seems that your hand is against us? You have ordained that we suffer and by these things be trained for true living in your kingdom. Jesus himself learned by the things he suffered. He did not lift up his hand against his oppressors but trusted himself to you. So grant, our Father that we may walk in patience until you have subdued every vile power that asserts itself against your reign. Who, in fact, can be against us? Surely, the trials of this present moment will soon be over! Hear our prayer in the name of him whom you have raised from the dead, even Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 17–18

Ahithophel knew the ways of politics and of battle, but not the ways of the kingdom of God. With minimum fuss, his advice could have secured Absalom as king and himself as the power behind the throne. Normally, Hushai could not outwit Ahithophel; David had asked him to return as a spy, not a counsellor. However, it was God's purpose that his advice brings ruin to Absalom. The faithful friend triumphed over the astute counsellor (I Chron. 27:33). As before, with Jonathan, the way of friendship or faithful love, was the way in which David's throne would be established. It was a bitter thing indeed if ever a friend of David forsook his covenant friendship (Psalm 55:12–14, 20–21).

Friendship has to do with covenant (Ps. 25:14; 55:20; Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14).

In the kingdom of Christ, the apostles were called, not his servants but his friends (John 15:7–17). They had heard all that the eternal Father had revealed to his Son. They knew the way of the kingdom was love, love that would lay down its life for a friend, and that this was what Jesus was about to do. Only in such a manner would the reign of God be established. The power of Christ's friends would be that, in his name, by which this love was poured out, they would ask the Father for whatever they wished and it would be given to them.

Hushai's warnings reached David by other faithful friends. Instead of being terrified by Absalom's swift action while still wearied and exhausted, David was warned, and managed a complete evacuation by morning. Back in Jerusalem, Ahithophel could no longer see any future for Absalom, or for himself. His vision was limited to the extent of his own wisdom. He saw that he would be implicated in the rebellion when Absalom inevitably failed, and chose suicide rather than execution.

The army of Israel needed a commander to replace Joab (David's half sister's son) who was with David. The job went to another relative of David (another half sister's grandson) and the Israelite army followed David across the Jordan. Help came for David and his troops from two older men (one had helped Mephibosheth escape, the other was 80 years old), and, strangely, an Ammonite. Perhaps he was the person David left in charge of the Ammonites when he defeated them earlier.

The battle was now ready to begin. Hushai led Absalom's troops. David's loyal friends understood the folly of his being with them, and he meekly complied with their advice. The story of the battle is easily told. David's men won, aided by the terrain.

The main story told here is David's care for and sorrow over Absalom. Joab, knowing David would always have problems while Absalom was alive, disobeyed an order and killed the rebel prince. Runners vied for the honour of bringing good news, completely misunderstanding the mind of the king. David was not concerned for vengeance but for Absalom, even to the risking of his own peace. David's behaviour is an enigma. He had failed in many respects to establish a rule of justice in his own family and left many people disappointed and confused. But who can argue with love? Jesus also chose twelve men, one of whom, he knew, was a devil (John 6:70).

Prayer

Father, you remain lord amidst the powers of this present world, and you reign through your crucified and risen Son. Through him, our Father, we have come to know your way, even the laying down of our lives for our friends. We thank you that the progress of your kingdom relies only on your intent to exalt your Son and to do us good. Persuaded of this, our Father, keep us steadfast amongst our many trials. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 19–20

Joab was disgusted with David's behaviour. The king's love for a rebel son outweighed any realistic assessment of who deserved to be thanked or rewarded. Joab put to him, that, potentially, he could have another rebellion on his hands if he did not act quickly. David took his place at the Mahanaim city gate, resuming his responsible public life, the place he seems to have abdicated in Jerusalem where his son's rebellion had begun (15:2).

Argument was heard across the whole land about bringing David back as king. David used the fact that the Northern tribes were involved in this to stir his own (Southern) tribe into action. He strengthened his summons with the promise to install rebel army commander Amasa to replace Joab. (The latter had fallen in favour because of his failure to protect Absalom and Amasa clearly had considerable sway in Judah.)

Shimei was now eager for David's forgiveness, and gained it at least for the time being. Reasons for this may be either that David wanted to show to this Benjamite the same favour that the Benjamite Saul had shown to people who had opposed him (I Sam. 11:12–15), or that Shemei had 1000 troops with him, or that he wanted to encourage the North to join in his restoration to the kingship. Once again, he had to hold back his loyal men from taking vengeance.

Ziba, it now appears, had lied about his master, Mephibosheth, and was also eager to show his subservience to the restored king. Mephibosheth was grateful David was back and that he had opportunity to protest his loyalty. Barzillai must have been a wonderful man, glad to serve the king but beyond the need for rewards. David, ever ready to reward his helpers, quickly took the opportunity to reward him by proxy.

Tensions between North and South were still alive, the North wanting to know why they had been upstaged, given their greater size. The South were defensive, saying David was their own tribesman. At another level, David had occasion to remember the word of Nathan that the sword would never depart from his house.

The severity of Judean arguments over the returning David gave Sheba his opportunity to galvanise the loyalty of the North around himself. He denied that they had any inheritance in David. His argument proceeded from what is seen rather than from the promise of God and he did not know what he was doing. God had promised to bless all Israel, and the world, through the Davidic kingship.

However, David returned to Jerusalem, quickly arranged for the outraged concubines, and settled into restoring his hold on the country. The new commander, Amasa, was given the impossible task of raising a new army in three days, perhaps intentionally. Then, the faithful mighty man, Abishai, with his professional troops was given the task instead. Joab was still part of this troop and seems to have taken the lead. Amasa then caught up with Joab, but the latter, ever ambitious, vengeful and wily, dispatched him quickly. One of his soldiers called for those who were for David to follow Joab, suggesting that Abishai had been less than eager to serve David. With the body of the murdered commander removed, Judah's army gathered behind Joab.

All at once, we hear that Joab had travelled to the far North, gaining support as he went, and that he had trapped Sheba in a small town. The essence of the whole story appears in the wisdom of a 'mother of Israel'. All this fighting should be directed to Israel having their inheritance, not about power and the destruction it brought about. The rebel was yielded up. The victory fell to Joab, and he brought victory back to David in Jerusalem. There, David was able to establish some stability for the land.

Prayer

O our Father, sometimes we are exhausted with the constant fighting for power, not just in the world, but among ourselves. Yet, our Father, there are still real battles to win and we cannot retire from service until every thought has been taken captive to Christ. Refresh us in the truth of your anointed Son. May our hearts be gathered to him, again and again, and ever more confidently. Keep us mindful of the power of the gospel by which you purpose to give us our inheritance. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 21–22

How could the Lord's king deal with famine? He enquired of God and found that the Lord was jealous for his own name. A vow to the Gibeonites had been broken. The Lord's purpose was to have these Gibeonites 'bless the inheritance of the Lord', not curse them, and this became the purpose of David as well. From the beginning, it was Israel's calling to have people bless them and so receive a blessing from the Lord (Gen. 12:1–3). God's covenant (not just a code but a bond of faithful love) was intended to demonstrate the worth of his law and his covenant (Deut. 4:8), especially through the faithfulness of his people, and this had been compromised. Even though the Gibeonites had gained their covenant with Israel by craftiness, it was still to be honoured, as Joshua had honoured it before (Josh. 9–10). Saul had done the opposite in his headlong rush to prove himself, and now, the wrongdoing was exposed by a judgement of God. His name had been profaned among the nations.

The offence required appropriate 'atonement' meaning here, reparation or compensation (as in Israel's guilt offerings). The Gibeonites may have had their own understanding of what was achieved by hanging these seven victims 'before the Lord' (perhaps including the idea that they would never again be at risk from Saul's family), but David was dealing with the God who had called Israel to account. He fulfilled their desire, so removing any occasion they had to curse Israel.

One of the mothers of the victims, perhaps eager that her loss not be in vain, protected the bodies (so God would see them?) until rain fell. David then gathered the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and the bones of the victims, buried the bones of the former with honour, and perhaps, the bones of the victims with them. Honour had been given in every direction and God blessed the land with rain. The famine was over.

David's men knew he was more than a great warrior. He was the 'lamp of Israel' because the promises of God to the nation were now focussed in his reign. David had gained glory by the fall of Philistia's mighty men (the Goliath episode had set the scene), but David's mighty men saw that they should now preserve David's life with their valour if they could. The psalm that follows shows what it meant that David was Israel's light.

The Davidic throne continued to be Israel's light (I Kin. 15:4; Ps. 132:17; cf. Lam. 4:20),

Behind the intrigue, bloodshed and sibling rivalry that surrounded David's life, there was a song to the God of his life (Ps. 42:8). Crags and caves and shields and strategies had not protected him but by the Lord being all these things to him (22:2–3, 32–36, 47). He had learned what Paul commended later: not to be anxious but to pray and to fix one's mind on whatever is honourable (Phil. 4:6–8). What could be more honourable than the Lord who is worthy to be praised. David's enemies had

taken him to the brink of death, but the Lord who was jealous for his welfare stirred himself and stirred the whole creation to David's defence.

Now, David was in a broad place, free to fulfil his calling and to enjoy the blessings of the covenant. His righteousness or keeping of covenant had been vindicated. The sins, which could well have been hurled at him by accusers, were gone. He lived in the covenant mercy of God and knew that when he had asked to be washed of his sin, he was whiter than snow (Ps. 51:7). In the strength of this, he had kept God's ordinances before him, especially the duty of kindness. Those who live by the kindness of the Lord will be attacked for their trust by all who hate God, but they will also be cared for by the Lord. So, the Lord himself had illuminated David's heart and shown him the way through his troubled days.

David knew that God was blameless (22:31); he knew that he also, by God's grace, was blameless (22:33). He knew God had ordained him head of the nations (22:44–46). It would be by his greater Son, Jesus, that all the blessings for the world, promised to him, would be secured, but the nations around Israel were being tutored, even now, for that day.

The Lord lives! May he be exalted! Let the nations hear this thanksgiving! When the Lord's Anointed (or Christ) did come, he was attacked by all who hated God and was encompassed by death. His only trust was the living God, his Father, and this Father would save him, and also us who have come to shelter under his protection.

This same Psalm appears again as Psalm 18.

Prayer

Father, if by our actions, we have caused others to curse your name, grant that we may quickly make peace with our accusers while we still have opportunity. By your grace and faithfulness, grant that we may live at peace with all men.

How great are the victories you have won through your Son, Jesus Christ! He felt all the pains of our sinful world and died in our place. But he trusted himself to you and you delivered him. Then Lord, we will praise you, for you have cleansed our hearts by faith, and lit your light among us so that we may not stumble in this present world. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 23–24

Someone, who acknowledged God's anointed king, recognised his victories and loved his songs, recorded David's last words. There is now no hint of the wars and family disputes that had been with him all his life. What remains is the purpose of God fulfilled in the life of the man he had chosen to reveal his name. David invited Israel to share his praise.

'God's Spirit spoke by me. The Lord, who is Israel's 'Rock' (a Place of protection and Source for drinking), said to me that by the righteous authority of one who fears the Lord, the world would gratefully prosper. Can you see, as I can see, that this is what God has been doing during my reign? All this has flowed from his covenant promise. All the desire I have for his glory in the earth will be fulfilled. Those who do not acknowledge that this is God's way are like thorns in a fruitful field. They cannot be tamed and will surely be destroyed.'

We are told of the exploits of the ‘three’ and the ‘thirty’ who shared David’s purpose. We do not know of men’s faith but we do know that God helped them. The love of the three who risked their lives to satisfy the longing of David for a drink from his homeland reveals the heart of the reign of God in the earth. Jesus would soon come and lay down his life. He has called us to have the same love among ourselves (John 15:12–13). A cup of water given in Christ’s name does not go unrewarded but demonstrates our readiness for the kingdom (Matt. 25:34–40).

For the second time in the closing section of II Samuel (21–24), the Lord was angry with Israel. This time, the reason was not important to reveal, but God dealt with it by allowing David to be tempted by Satan (I Chron. 21:1) to number and enrol his troops. Had David forgotten the word of his friend Jonathan that ‘nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few’ (I Sam. 14:6)? Joab and the other commanders could see this would attract God’s anger; there was no need for this action other than to satisfy some private ambition of David’s. Their protests were overruled and a massive census was conducted.

If the numbers seem large, it may be that ‘a thousand’ is a technical term referring to a troop of somewhat lesser numbers.

The significance of taking a census is suggested by each person having to make an offering for atonement for themselves when they were acknowledged as part of Israel (Exod. 30:12).

David was still just as capable of foolishness as Saul had been (cf. 24:12 with I Sam. 13:13), but he loved God and, after the event, was horrified at what he had done, and sought peace with God. Would the country now fall into another three years of famine (as in 21:1), or three months of defeat, or three days of God’s direct judgement. David preferred the anger of God to the anger of man because he had discovered the greatness of God’s mercy.

God’s anger had been against all Israel and now that judgement fell on men from one end of the country to the other. Only when Jerusalem was about to fall did he call on the angel to stop. At that moment, David saw the poised sword and offered himself and his family as victim enough for the sin he had committed. Here was a shepherd, again, offering himself so that the people could be saved (cf. Exod. 32:32). It was time for the mercy of God, and God dispatched a prophet to call the grieving David to make an offering. So, from David’s own property, an offering was made, and, for a second time in these closing chapters, the Lord was moved by prayer for the land (24:25 with 21:14).

The account in I Chronicles 22:1 is fuller and includes David’s declaration: ‘Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel.’ He knew this was ‘the place that the LORD’ had chosen ‘as a dwelling for his name’ (Deut. 12:11), the place where mercy triumphed over judgement (cf. James 2:13).

Prayer

Father, we give thanks that your Son lives and reigns in this present world and that, even now, he leads us in triumph. Let no sorrows from the past dull the song your Church sings to you and to your Son!

Yet we are always subject to your wrath, not that we may be consumed, but that we may know that you are God and that we may know your mercy again. Keep our hearts tender before you. Make your dwelling with us forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

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