

## 2 SAMUEL 15 - 1 KINGS 1

It may be surprising to consider how quickly the plot of Absalom grows. He has many key people backing him, including David's chief counselor/advisor - Ahithophel. There is, however, a counterplot that develops on David's side, and the strategy pays off. Absalom prefers the counsel of David's spy (Hushai) rather than Ahithophel. This is a mistake. He plays right into David's hand. Ahithophel, on his part, knows the mistake but can do nothing about it now that his counsel is not followed. He goes home, settles his affairs and kills himself rather than face the charge of treason.

David loves his son Absalom and wants him captured unharmed. Joab, however, the uncompromising warrior and strategist, knows that if Absalom lives, David is forever vulnerable. Thus, he ignores David's counsel (it's not the first time and it won't be the last) and has Absalom brutally executed.

Those who remain loyal to David are rewarded. Those who betray him or turn on him, however, are not necessarily punished or executed. One reason is that David is mindful of the mercy of God. If he is mistreated, God may have greater sympathy for him and support his cause. If David becomes the aggressor, on the other hand, God may not be so kind to him. In the context of brutal militarism, David's instincts for mercy and kindness are unusual. This should be kept in mind and balanced over against other actions of David which seem much more merciless.

Moreover, David's refusal to kill all his enemies has some strategy behind it also. By sparing Absalom's supporters and giving them new positions in his army and administration, David hopes to cement his kingdom. The reality is that Israel was divided between the 10 tribes ("Israel") and the 2 tribes ("Judah"). Israel had backed Abner and Saul's son against David, until David was able to bring Abner on board. Now, Israel had also backed Absalom against David. David needed to bring Israel back to the fold. Also, he wants to bring back all Absalom's supporters into the fold in order to have a united kingdom, and among the ways he does this is by placing Amasa (Absalom's chief army commander) over his army in place of Joab (David has had it in for Joab for a while now). Joab, however, does to Amasa what he did to Abner. By stealth, he kills him, eliminating him as a threat.

David mourns the death of Absalom, and this shames his army because even though they are victorious in having put down the rebellion, they have failed to keep Absalom alive. But Joab gets angry with David and warns him that the army may revolt against him if he does not show them sufficient gratitude and appreciation. David does this.

In Chapter 21, there is a strange account of blood guilt and its bloody resolution. We are being asked to believe that David handed over 7 grandchildren of Saul for execution by the Gibeonites who had suffered a massacre under Saul's

instigation when he was king. Now the idea here is that there is a famine in Israel and David discerns (through his 'inquiry of the Lord') that the grievance of the Gibeonites needs to be settled before the famine is ended. Again, this is an awful image of the way God supposedly works.

In 22-23, we have a wonderful, poetic, psalm-like thanksgiving of David for the ways God has blessed him. The emphasis is on God, not on David. God is the one who has given David the power and the blessing, and David's attitude is one of humble gratitude and adoration. This is a very different posture than that of Saul, and it exemplifies the ideal way of the faithful king.

In 23 -24, there are lists and descriptions of David's "Mighty Men." They are warriors who have accomplished great feats of bravery and victory in battle. There is also a strange account of a census David initiates. At first, it seems, it is God who is agitating David to do this. But a closer reading gives us the impression that David is taking stock of his kingdom, and this could be an act of pride over against God. For all his success, David needs to remember that Israel belongs to God and God is the one who has blessed David with his success. God is depicted as upset with David's census initiative and gives David 3 choices for punishment. David chooses natural disaster rather than enemy victory. Again, this image of God's working is hard to square with the New Testament.

Finally, as we move into the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Kings, we come to the account of David's succession. There are two contenders among his sons, the oldest remaining (the first born, Amnon, was killed by Absalom for raping Tamar and Absalom was killed by Joab) is Adonijah. After him there is Solomon. Joab, Abiathar (one of the high priests) and some other key people back Adonijah, without consulting David. Nathan the prophet, Zadok the priest, Benaiah (head of David's elite personal guard) and other key officials and warriors consult David through Bathsheba and back Solomon. When David gives word that Solomon is the one, Joab and the others try to find a way to survive. The story of each of their downfalls is recorded, and it is pathetic to see them come to nothing. In Joab's case, though, he has it coming. It is amazing to see him die in such a pathetic way, exercising no resistance.

So what do we learn from this bloody yet exciting story of the establishment of the kingdom of Israel?

1) Faithfulness to God no matter what is the first priority. The faithful person does not turn to the right or to the left. They trust God in their fear and hopelessness on the one hand, and they follow God past their temptations for power, money and immorality on the other. Eli, Samuel and Nathan are unwavering prophets who live this. There is David and many other lesser personalities (notably Jonathan and Abigail) who also live this in the face of numerous temptations to act otherwise. In David's case, he fails in several key moments. But God forgives him, although David lives out some hard consequences of his mistakes. Even

though forgiveness is always ours with God, the consequences of our 'sins' are part of our life in formation.

2) Even though brutality is often ordered and in some cases pays off, in the end, those who establish relationships of integrity, trust, faithfulness, kindness and love are vindicated. Even though personalities like Jonathan or Abner are doomed, their memory is vindicated in the story. Even though personalities like Joab succeed in life, in the end, their brutality and lack of kindness is paid back in full. Kindness and compassion are never wasted, even though people suffer and die because they live by them.

3) Even though God is depicted as a warrior God who demands the blood of Israel's enemies, God comes most alive when intimate faithfulness is expressed and lived toward God. God makes a covenant with David and God's covenant is permanent and unwavering (the biblical description of God in this is that of "steadfast love"). Even though David (and we who inherit the biblical tradition as Christians) makes many horrible mistakes, God's commitment to him is forever. This is very comforting, and it encourages us to re-align ourselves with God over and over again by confessing the wrongs in us and wrestling with the ambiguities in us. This confessing and wrestling, as well as the thanksgiving and humble gratitude, lead to a relationship with God of ever greater warmth and intimacy. This warmth and intimacy, in turn, gives us greater comfort, security and effectiveness as we continue to live our lives with peace and purpose. Such is the promise taught in 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.