

1 SAMUEL – PROPHET OF THE LORD

Samuel's mother had been childless for years. She prayed for God's help, on condition that if God gave her a son, she would give him back to the Lord. It is easy to forget a vow like that, made in extremity, but Hannah faithfully kept her word, and young Samuel entered the service of the Tabernacle under **Eli**, the high priest. The little Levite was a breath of fresh air in the decayed atmosphere of Israel's idolatry. Accepted as a prophet of the Lord, and later a Judge, he began a reformation after the death of Eli that would lift Israel up into the mountain peaks of the reign of David, Israel's greatest king. But first there was trouble.

The **Philistines**, a tough warrior people living on the western border of Israel, attacked them, and captured the holy Ark, symbol of God's presence. They had superior weapons, and oppressed the people for many years. Eventually the Israelites came to Samuel and asked him to appoint a king over them. Up to now they had God in heaven as their ruler (a type of government known as a **theocracy**), but now they wanted to be like the other nations around them with a living head they could follow in battle. With God's permission, Samuel anointed **Saul**, a tall, vigorous man who successfully defeated the Philistines in a number of skirmishes. Unhappily, power went to his head and he became proud and self-centred, more concerned with the adulation of the people than the praise of God. It was a disappointing start to Israel's monarchy. Eventually Samuel had the sad duty of informing Saul that he would be replaced by another, closer to God's heart. This made him intensely jealous, looking out for anyone who might challenge his office.

The choice of Saul's successor was instructive. God sent Samuel to Bethlehem, the city of Ruth's grandson Jesse, telling him to anoint one of Jesse's sons. When the firstborn stood before him, tall and handsome, Samuel was sure this was the one. But God spoke to the aged prophet –

"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

This is an important principle, and even after years of experience of human nature, Samuel had been caught out. In fact, God chose David, Jesse's youngest son, more used to sheep herding than managing men, because his heart was humble, and he had a living faith in God.

David was destined for true greatness, but first had to suffer years of frustration and hardship at the hands of Saul. He came to public attention at the battle of the **Valley of Elah**, described in 1 Samuel chapter 17. The Philistines had a gigantic champion, **Goliath**, who challenged any Israelite to come across and fight him single-handed. David, though only a youth, was incensed to hear him shout curses at the God of Israel. Armed only with his sling and staff, he set off across the valley, confident God would give him victory. With a skill honed by years of shepherding he selected the one gap in Goliath's armour, and sank a sling stone deep into his forehead.

David's valour propelled him to the position of head of the army, and he became the star of the day, to the envy of Saul, who now feared him as a rival. After several attempts on his life David was forced to flee, dodging Saul's spies and soldiers with a band of rebels who joined his ranks, and hiding in caves and valleys in the mountains. The story of his escapades, and his undiminished faith in God, occupies the last thirteen chapters of 1 Samuel. It is as gripping as any fiction writer could invent.

At last the day came for God to fulfil His promise. Saul and his sons, including **Jonathan**, David's best friend, fell dead in the disastrous **Battle of Gilboa**, and the way was open for David to return from exile and take the throne.

2 SAMUEL – DAVID BECOMES KING

The second book of Samuel begins with David's coronation in **Hebron** by the people of Judah, his own tribe. His rule was constrained by the fact that some tribes were still loyal to Saul's surviving son **Ishbosheth**, and his commander **Abner**. But after seven years the power struggle was resolved by the assassination of Ishbosheth, and David became king over all Israel. His first move, to unify the tribes, was to create a new capital in the centre of the country. **Jerusalem** was well guarded by deep valleys and with a good water supply. Here he built a palace, and to strengthen the worship of God, brought up the Ark from its long exile. The Philistines had left him alone while the country was divided. Now, perceiving him as a real challenge, they launched a pre-emptive strike against his new capital, forcing him to flee. But seeking God's help in prayer, he rallied, and in two decisive conflicts in the **Valley of Rephaim** outside Jerusalem, ended permanently the ambitions of his fierce neighbours.

The seventh chapter of 2 Samuel is important. It contains a vital **promise** made by God to David, ranking alongside those made to Abraham and Eve. Half a millennium before, Moses had told the people that when they reached the Promised Land God would choose one of their cities as a permanent place of worship. Naturally, David hoped this would be his new capital, Jerusalem. To start things moving, he told **Nathan** the prophet he wanted to build a splendid **Temple**, fit for his God. Nathan came back with a reply from the Lord. God was pleased with his offer, he said, but it would be his son, a man of peace, who would be entrusted with that task. However, he added, God had decided to build David a house – not a house of wood and stone, but a kingly house or dynasty. One of David's descendants would sit on his throne, he said, who would be not only David's son, but God's son too, and he would reign over God's people *for ever*. The solution to this conundrum had to wait until the birth of Jesus, who was to be both David's descendant and son of God.

The record continues with David's military successes against the surrounding nations, carving out a huge area under his control from Lebanon to the border with Egypt. From this mountain top of human pride, he was to fall very low. Lazing on his palace balcony one night while his army was away attacking Moab, he saw a beautiful woman bathing herself outdoors, and desired to have her. To his dismay, she became pregnant. Her husband was a distinguished army captain. David recalled him to Jerusalem, and suggested he go home to his wife, hoping the baby would appear to be his. But **Uriah** failed to comply. David callously then wrote a letter to **Joab**, commander of the army, carried by Uriah himself, bidding him place the hapless soldier in the front line, so that he would be killed. David then hastily married his widow, **Bathsheba**, to make the birth appear legitimate but premature. It was too clumsy a device to deceive his citizens, and it certainly did not escape the eyes of the Lord. Months later **Nathan** the prophet knocked on his door. Trapping David in the folds of a parable in which he condemned himself, he brought the royal sinner to confess his faults before God. The depths of his remorse are graphically penned in the words of Psalm 51

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

The baby died. And as Nathan predicted, bloodshed rent apart David's family from that day onwards. But his sin was forgiven. David was not normally an adulterer or murderer. We can take warning from the way power corrupts morals. But we can also find comfort in the abiding mercy of God to repentant sinners.

Seven chapters follow, spotlighting the curse David had brought on his own house. His oldest son was murdered by **Absalom**, second in line to the throne. Absalom then plotted a coup against his own father, which he sprang without warning, forcing David to flee for his life. The rebellion almost succeeded, but ended when his son died in battle, leaving the grieving king safe to return to his throne.

The climax of 2 Samuel comes in the last chapter. David had been persuaded to take a census of his subjects, perhaps to be able to boast of his achievements. But God was already angry with his people for their ungodliness, and sent a plague that drastically reduced their numbers. Dismayed, David called down the punishment upon himself, just as Jesus his descendant in later years would bear the sins of the people. And fittingly, in that hour God revealed to the aged king the place for His altar and Temple. It was not to be in David's city, as he had once hoped, but a little to the north, on **Mount Moriah**. It was the place where Abraham had been prepared to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, and close to the spot where Jesus was to be crucified, outside the city walls. The jagged rock around which the Temple was built is still there today, covered by a Muslim shrine.