

Part 20

2 Samuel 1:1–2:7 (See 1 Chronicles 10:1–12)

David, King of Judah

For ten years David was an exile with a price on his head, fleeing from Saul and waiting for the time when God would put him on the throne of Israel. During those difficult years, David grew in faith and godly character, and God equipped him for the work He had chosen for him to do. When the day of victory did arrive, David was careful not to force himself on the people, many of whom were still loyal to the house of Saul. He took a cautious approach, and we can't help but admire David for his wisdom and patience as he won the affection and allegiance of the people and sought to unify the shattered nation. "So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Ps. 78:72 NKJV).

1. Vindication (2 Sam. 1:1–16)

The Lord prevented David and his men from assisting the Philistines in their battle against Saul and Israel, so David returned to Ziklag. There he discovered that the Amalekites had invaded and taken all the people and goods and had left the town in ruins. God in His providence led David to the Amalekite camp. David routed the enemy, delivered the women and children, and reclaimed all the goods as well as the loot the Amalekites had collected in their raids. He then returned to Ziklag and awaited a report from the battlefield (1 Sam. 29–30).

A deceitful messenger (2 Sam. 1:1–10). On the day that David was slaughtering the Amalekites, the Philistines were overpowering Saul and his army at Mount Gilboa, where they killed Saul and three of his sons (1 Sam. 31; 1 Chron. 10:1–12).

The next day, while David was returning to Ziklag, the Philistines were humiliating Saul by desecrating his body and the bodies of his sons, and the Amalekite messenger was starting off to bring the news to David. It took him at least three days to get to Ziklag, which was about eighty miles from the scene of the battle. So it was on David's third day in Ziklag that he received the tragic news that Israel had been defeated and that Saul and three of his sons were dead.

Scripture gives us three accounts of the death of Saul and his sons:

1 Samuel 31:1–13, the report of the messenger in 2 Samuel 1:1–10, and the record in 1 Chronicles 10:1–14.

According to 1 Chronicles 10:4–5, Saul killed himself by falling on his sword,

but the messenger said he had killed Saul to save him from experiencing further agony and humiliation.

1 Chronicles 10:14 informs us that it was God who killed Saul for his rebellion, especially the sin of seeking guidance from a medium.

Only with great difficulty can the reports in 1 Samuel 31 and 1 Chronicles 10 be reconciled with the report of the messenger; therefore, it's likely the man was lying.

There's no question that the man had been on the battlefield. While he was searching for spoils, he found the corpses of Saul and his sons before the Philistines had identified them, and he took Saul's insignias of kingship, his golden armband, and the gold chaplet he wore on his helmet. However, the Amalekite didn't kill Saul as he claimed, because Saul and his sons were already dead. But by claiming that he did, he lost his own life.

One of the key words in this chapter is fallen, found in verses 4, 10, 12, 19, and 27. When Saul began his royal career, he was described as standing head and shoulders "taller than any of the people" (1 Sam. 9:2; see 1 Sam. 10:23 and 16:7), but he ended his career a fallen king. He fell on his

face in fear in the house of the spirit medium (1 Sam. 28:20), and he fell on the battlefield before the enemy (1 Sam. 31:4). David humbled himself before the Lord, and the Lord lifted him up; but Saul's pride and rebellion brought him to a shameful end. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV). Saul was anointed king at the dawning of a new day (1 Sam. 9:26–27), but he chose to walk in the darkness (1 Sam. 28:8) and disobey the will of God.

A grieving camp (2 Sam. 1:11–12). The Amalekite messenger must have been shocked and then afraid when he saw David and his men tearing their garments and mourning the death of Saul. He thought that everybody in Ziklag would rejoice to hear the news of Saul's death, knowing that this meant the end of their dangerous fugitive way of life. He probably expected to be rewarded for bringing such good news, but he obviously didn't know the heart of David. In David's eyes, Saul was never his enemy (2 Sam. 22:1); and on the two occasions when David might have slain Saul, he made it clear that he would never lay hands on the Lord's anointed (1 Sam. 24:1–7; 26:1–11).

The messenger claimed that he was an Amalekite, the son of a resident alien (2 Sam. 1:13). But if he had been living in the land of Israel, he surely would have known that the king of Israel was the anointed of the Lord. If a loyal Jew had found the four corpses, he would have sought to hide them and protect them from the enemy; but the Amalekites were the enemies of Israel, the very people Saul was supposed to wipe out (1 Sam. 15). It's likely that the messenger was a genuine Amalekite but not a resident alien in Israel. He was more likely a "camp follower" who made his living scavenging after the Philistine army. By claiming to be the son of a resident alien, the man was asking for certain privileges specified in the Law of Moses, privileges he certainly didn't deserve (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33; 24:22; Deut. 24:17).

A righteous judgment (2 Sam. 1:13–16). At evening, when the time of mourning had ended, David further interrogated the messenger and concluded that the man deserved to die. If the story he told was true, then the man had murdered God's anointed king and deserved to die. If the story was not true, the fact that the Amalekite fabricated a tale about killing the king revealed the depravity of his heart. "Out of your own mouth I will judge you" (Luke 19:22 NKJV). The Jews had been commanded to annihilate the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17–19), so when David ordered the messenger to be slain, he was simply obeying the Lord, something Saul had failed to do (1 Sam. 15).

In slaying the messenger, David vindicated Saul and his sons and demonstrated publicly that he had not been Saul's enemy and did not rejoice at Saul's death. This was a dangerous thing to do, for David and his men were living in Philistine territory, and the Philistine king still thought David was his friend and ally. For David to take his stand with the dead king of Israel could be considered an act of treason. But the Lord had vindicated David and David had vindicated Saul, and David wasn't afraid. The conduct of David and his camp, when reported to the Jewish people, would help to convince them that David indeed was chosen by God to be their king.

2. Lamentation (2 Sam. 1:17–27)

David's grief over the death of Saul and Jonathan was sincere, and to help the people remember them, he wrote a touching elegy in their honor. He ordered this lament to be taught and sung in his ancestral tribe of Judah, and no doubt people in other tribes learned and appreciated it. The people of the East unashamedly display their emotions, and their poets frequently write songs to help them commemorate both joyful and painful experiences. Moses taught Israel a song to warn them about apostasy (Deut. 32), and the prophets often wrote funeral dirges to announce impending judgment (Isa. 14:12ff; Ezek. 27:1ff; 28:11–19).

This lament came to be known as "The Song of the Bow" (v. 18) and was recorded in the Book of Jasher (Josh. 10:12–13), a collection of poems and songs that commemorated great events in the history of Israel. "How are the mighty fallen" is the major theme of the elegy (vv. 19, 25, 27), and the emphasis is on the greatness of Saul and Jonathan even in defeat and death. David celebrated their

skill and bravery and their willingness to give their lives for their country. Like Hebrews 11, nothing is recorded in the song that speaks of any sins or mistakes in the lives of Saul and Jonathan.

He addresses the people of Israel (2 Sam. 1:19–20). David calls the dead king and his army “Your glory, O Israel” and “the mighty.” They didn’t display much glory or might in the battle of Gilboa, but Saul was still God’s chosen leader and his soldiers were the army of the Lord of Hosts. We’re prone to forget that Saul and his army had risked their lives to fight and win many significant battles (1 Sam. 14:47–48) and that the Jewish women did sing “Saul has slain his thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7). David urged the people not to spread the bad news of Israel’s defeat, for the Philistines would take care of that. Gath was the capital city of the Philistines where the leaders would rejoice at their victory, and Ashkelon was the chief religious center, where the people would give thanks to their idols for helping their army defeat Israel.

He addresses the mountains of Gilboa (2 Sam. 1:21). This is where the battle was fought and Saul was defeated (2 Sam. 1:6; 1 Sam. 28:4; 31:1). David prayed that God would forsake the place and not send rain or dew to the fields or give the farmers fruitful harvests, even though this meant there could be no grain offerings for the Lord. He asked that God’s creation join him in mourning over the defeat of Israel and the fall of their king. When David referred to the shield, was he speaking literally or metaphorically, or both? Saul carried a shield, and Israel’s king was compared to a shield (Ps. 84:9; 89:18). Warriors did anoint their leather shields to preserve them, but the king was also God’s anointed leader. Saul and his three sons had lost their shields and their lives, and their shields were defiled by blood.

He praises Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:22–23). This is the heart of the song, depicting Saul and Jonathan as victorious warriors. Jonathan’s arrows hit their mark and Saul’s sword “did not return unsatisfied.” They were as swift as eagles (Deut. 28:49) and as strong as lions (2 Sam. 17:10). But to David, these men weren’t just great soldiers; they were also gracious people who were beloved in life and in death loyal to each other and to the people. From his meeting with Samuel in the medium’s house, Saul knew that he and his sons would die that day in battle (1 Sam. 28:19), yet he entered the contest determined to do his best. Jonathan knew that his father had disobeyed God and sinned against David, yet he stayed at his side in the fight. Even though the army of Israel was defeated, David wanted the people to remember the greatness of their king and his sons.

He addresses the daughters of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 1:24). In spite of his faults and failures, during his reign Saul had brought stability to the nation. The tribes had abandoned selfish independence and competition and were striving to work together to better their lot, including their economic position. Saul’s victories over enemy nations, greater safety in the towns and farmlands, and tribal cooperation all combined to make Israel wealthier. David seems to be describing the wealthy women and their luxuries, perhaps the wives of some of Saul’s officers David had seen while he was serving in Saul’s court. “Clothed ... in scarlet and finery” is a familiar phrase that means “basking in wealth.”

He speaks to his beloved friend Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:25–26). It’s common in funeral dirges to name and address the deceased. “Jonathan my brother” carries a double meaning, for they were brothers-in-law (David was married to Michal, Jonathan’s sister) and also brothers in heart and spirit. David and Jonathan were beloved friends who had covenanted together to share the throne, David as king and Jonathan as second in command (1 Sam. 23:16–18). To read homosexual overtones into David’s expressions of his love for Jonathan is to misinterpret his words. Solomon described the love of husband and wife as “strong as death” (Song 8:6 NKJV), and the friendship of David and Jonathan was that strong. First Samuel 18:1 NIV says, “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.” David closed his lament by repeating the poignant refrain “How are the mighty fallen” and comparing Saul and Jonathan to weapons of war that had been lost and could never be used again.

In composing and teaching this elegy, David may have had several purposes in mind. For one thing, he gave honor to Saul and Jonathan and taught the people to respect the monarchy. Since Saul was Israel's first king, the people might conclude that all their kings would follow his bad example and possibly ruin the nation, so David sought to strengthen the concept of monarchy. The song also made it clear to everybody that David held no grudges against his father-in-law and sovereign. Finally, David set an example for all of us to follow in paying loving tribute to those who have died in battle to protect their country.

3. Coronation (2 Sam. 2:1–4a)

David was Israel's lawful king and couldn't remain in Ziklag since it was in enemy territory. It's likely that Achish, the Philistine king, thought that David was still under his authority, but David knew that he must return to his own land and begin to reign over his own people. David was in the habit of seeking the Lord's will when he had to make decisions, either by having Abiathar the priest consult the ephod (1 Sam. 23:9–12) or by asking Gad the prophet to pray to God for a word of wisdom (1 Sam. 22:5).

David was from Judah, so it was logical that he go to live among his own people, but in which city should he reside? God gave him permission to return to Judah and told him to live in Hebron, which was located about twenty-five miles from Ziklag. By moving there, David was back with his own people but still under the shadow of the Philistines. Hebron was important in Jewish history, for near the city was the tomb of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. The city was in the inheritance of Caleb, a man of stature in Jewish history (Josh. 14:14). Abigail, one of David's wives, had been married to a Calebite, and David had inherited her property near the wilderness of Maon (1 Sam. 25:2). Hebron was probably the most important city in the southern part of Judah, so David moved there with his men, and they lived in the towns surrounding Hebron. For the first time in ten years, David and his men were no longer fugitives. His men had suffered with him, and now they would reign with him (see 2 Tim. 2:12).

When David settled in Hebron, his return to Judah was the signal for his people to recognize him as their leader, so the elders of Judah anointed David a second time and made him king (see 1 Sam. 16:13). Had Saul's captain Abner also accepted God's will and submitted to David, a costly civil war would have been averted, but loyalty to the old regime (Abner was Saul's nephew) and a desire to protect his own interests motivated Abner to fight David instead of follow him.

While David was living in Ziklag, volunteers had come to him from the tribes of Benjamin, Gad, and Manasseh (1 Chron. 12:1–22), so he not only had a large and experienced army but also a representation from some of the other tribes. Before long, David would win the allegiance of all the nation of Israel.

In his accession to the throne of Israel, David illustrates the career of Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Like David the shepherd, Jesus came first as a humble servant and was anointed king privately. Like David the exile, Jesus is King today but doesn't yet reign on the throne of David. Like Saul in David's day, Satan is still free to obstruct God's work and oppose God's people. One day, Jesus will return in glory, Satan will be imprisoned, and Jesus will reign in His glorious kingdom (Rev. 19:11–20:6). God's people today faithfully pray "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10 KJV) and eagerly await the return of their King.

David was thirty years old when the elders of Judah made him their king, and he reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years (2 Sam. 2:11). How blessed were the people of Judah to have such a gifted and godly leader!

4. Appreciation (2 Sam. 2:4b–7)

David was a man with a shepherd's heart who cared about his people (see 2 Sam. 24:17), and one of his first concerns was the fate of Saul and the three sons who died with him. When he asked the

leaders of Judah about the burial of the royal family, they told him how the men of Jabesh Gilead had risked their lives to recover the four bodies, burn away the decayed and mutilated flesh, and then bury the bones back at Jabesh (1 Sam. 31:8–13). They remembered how Saul had rescued their city many years before (1 Sam. 11).

Jabesh Gilead was located across the Jordan in the tribe of Gad, and the men who recovered the bodies had to travel northwest and cross the Jordan River to reach Beth Shan, a round trip of perhaps twenty-five miles. It was a courageous endeavor, and David thanked them for their devotion to Saul and to the kingdom of Israel. They had displayed “kindness,” and the Lord would show them “kindness and faithfulness.” Twenty-five years later, David would disinter the remains of Saul and the sons who died with him and rebury them in their native tribe of Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:12–14)

But David used this occasion as an opportunity to invite the brave men of Jabesh Gilead to cast their lot with him. They had been valiant for Saul, and now they could be valiant for David. Some warriors from Gad had already joined David’s army while he was in Ziklag (1 Chron. 12:8–15), affirming their confidence that he was God’s anointed king. Unfortunately, the people of Jabesh Gilead didn’t choose to submit to David but instead followed Abner and Saul’s weak son Ish-Bosheth.

The people of Jabesh Gilead allowed their affection for Saul to blind them to God’s plan for the nation. They had a good motive, but they made a bad choice. How often in the history of the church have God’s people allowed human affection and appreciation to overrule the will of God! Jesus Christ is King and He deserves our submission, loyalty, and obedience. To put human leaders ahead of God’s anointed King is to create division and weakness in the ranks of the Lord’s followers and invite multiplied problems for the Lord’s people. As Augustine of Hippo said, “Jesus Christ will be Lord of all or He will not be Lord at all.”