

2 SAMUEL

Part One: David's Rise to Power (Chapters 1-10)

While there is no real break in the story as we move into the second book of Samuel, the following is one way to divide the twenty-four chapters of this book:

David's successes (chapters 1-10):

- David becomes King of Judah
- David becomes King of Israel
- David conquers the surrounding nations

David's struggles (chapters 11-24):

- David's sin with Bathsheba
- Turmoil in David's family
- National rebellion against David
- Later years of David's rule

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Report of Saul's death; lament for Saul and Jonathan

"Saul and Jonathan, beloved and cherished, separated neither in life nor in death...." (v.23)

Verses 1-16—Report of Saul's death. David and his followers are in Philistine territory when an Amalekite brings him the news that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead. The Amalekite even declares that he has killed the wounded Saul, thinking perhaps that this will gain him a sizable reward from David. After all, Saul had tried several times to kill David. Not only does the visitor boast of his achievement but he also delivers Saul's crown to David. The account of Saul's death in these verses contradicts 1Samuel 31 which says that Saul committed suicide.

If the Amalekite thinks he would win David's favor by killing Saul, he is very wrong. For David, the issue is clear: the Amalekite committed a terrible crime for slaying the Lord's anointed (v.14), which deserves the death penalty.

Verses 17-27—Lament for Saul and Jonathan. Interestingly, David does not rejoice but laments the death of his enemy Saul. He composes a beautiful poem that helps the nation to grieve the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Saul is remembered not as a friend but as a warrior, as a soldier. David hopes the Philistines will not hear of the death lest they sing for joy. In contrast, the women of Israel should grieve

the loss of the king. As for Jonathan, he is remembered as a fine soldier but, most of all, as a wonderful and loyal friend.

Pause: Most people do not grieve life's losses. Instead, they try to move forward with their lives, ignoring a particular loss. Why is this?

CHAPTER 2: David, King of Judah; Ishbaal, King of Israel

David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?" (v.1)

Having grieved the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, David makes his move to return to his homeland. After seeking the Lord's direction, David arrives in Hebron, a city of his own tribe of Judah. His own people anoint him as their king. In verses 5-7, David reaches out a hand of friendship to the men of Jabesh-gilead of the tribe of Benjamin (Saul's tribe). As we shall see, it will demand much diplomacy and military power for David to win over those still loyal to Saul.

Verses 8-9. Abner, Saul's powerful general, takes Ishbaal, Saul's son, and makes him king. In reality, Ishbaal is a puppet-king, for Abner is the one with all the power.

Verses 12-16. Abner and his men meet David's top general and his soldiers by the pool of Gibeon. What appears to be an innocent proposal for some young soldiers from each side to "rise and perform for us" (v.4) turns into a bloodbath. At the end of "the party," twenty-four men are dead.

Verses 17-24 describe the encounter between Abner and Asahel (Joab's brother). In the worst way, Asahel wants to kill Abner. Abner appeals to him twice to quit running after him. *"Stop pursuing me."* Abner does not want to provoke Asahel because he knows it will only escalate the civil war between Saul's forces and David's, represented by Joab. Because Asahel refuses to stop harassing Abner, he is killed. Then Asahel's brothers, Joab and Abishai, start to pursue Abner.

Verses 25-32 recount the truce between the two sides, both counting their own losses.

Chapter 2 speaks to issues such as: how we seek to manipulate others for our own advantage; how we decide when enough is enough; how we try to teach another a lesson an enemy will never forget; how we endeavor to bring about a truce to a conflict situation.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 2?

CHAPTERS 3-4: Deaths of Abner and Ishbaal

“Before the Lord, I and my kingdom are forever innocent...for the death of Abner.” (vv. 28-29)

As the civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David drags on, the house of David grows stronger—a point underlined by the narrator by giving us details of David’s growing family (vv. 2-5).

A conflict between Abner and Ishbaal (vv. 6-11) causes Abner to defect from the house of Saul and seek to cut a deal with David. Abner realizes that it is God’s will that David be king (v.9).

Verses 12-21—Abner and David reconcile. Abner tells David: *“Make an agreement with me, and I will aid you by bringing all Israel over to you”* (v.12). David is ready to deal with Abner on one condition: that Abner delivers to him Michal, Saul’s daughter and formerly David’s first wife (see 1Sam 18:20-28). Michal is delivered to David without regard for her feelings or her husband’s (v.15).

Then Abner speaks to the elders of Israel telling them that it is in their best interest to have David as their king, for he will defend them against the Philistines, which Saul was unable to do. The reconciliation of the two old enemies is celebrated with a banquet (v.20).

When Joab returns from battle (v.22) and hears that Abner has come to David to make peace with him, he is furious and lashes out at David (vv 24-25). Not only does Joab hate Abner for siding with Saul against David and for killing his brother, but most likely he also feels threatened by Joab’s presence. Perhaps David will make him his top general. To avenge his brother’s death and to protect himself and the state from any threat Abner may pose, Joab brutally kills him.

Verses 28-39. Declaring that he has nothing to do with Abner’s death (v.28), David places a curse on Joab and his family (vv. 29-30). Then he leads the whole nation in a mourning ceremony for the great general Abner (vv. 31-39). In publicly grieving for Abner, David is showing himself to be a great leader. His action is also motivated by his desire to appease Abner’s and Saul’s loyalists, not alienate them.

In chapter 4, we read how Ishbaal is murdered while taking a siesta. His killers bring the king’s head to David thinking that they will be rewarded. But they receive the same treatment as the Amalekite who came to tell David that he had killed his enemy Saul (2Sam 1). In these past chapters, the narrator shows us that David’s enemies have been removed without any action by David. It is as if God is paving the way for David to be king of the whole of Israel.

Pause: When you witness conflicts in your work situation or in your family or extended family, what do you generally tend to do? Try to be a peacemaker? Ignore the conflict? Take sides?

CHAPTER 5: David, King of Israel

All the tribes of Israel came to David in Hebron and said: *“Here we are, your bone and your flesh. In days past, when Saul was our king, it was you who led the Israelites out and brought them back. And the Lord said to you, ‘You shall shepherd my people Israel and shall be commander of Israel’”* (vv. 1-2).

The opening verses of this chapter are seen by most scholars as the conclusion of a long narrative on the *Rise of David*, beginning in 1Sam 16.

Having become king of all of Israel, David makes *Jerusalem* the new capital of his united kingdom. Until its capture, Jerusalem was a pagan city held by the Jebusites. Taking Jerusalem as his new national capital is a shrewd move by David, since it is located at the frontier between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Saul’s tribe). By choosing Jerusalem, David shows that he doesn’t favor tribes from the north or south. When David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, it will also become the *religious center* of the nation.

Verses 17-25. The Israelites led by David defeat the Philistines. Notice that David only moves into battle after he consults the Lord. In doing this, David presents himself to be the ideal king. David

remembers that God is the real king of Israel and that he is only God's good and obedient servant.

CHAPTER 6: The Ark is brought to Jerusalem

"David...came dancing before the Lord with abandon, as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts of joy and the sound of the horn." (v.15)

The transport of the Ark from its obscure storage to its new place of prestige and significance is an enormously important event for David. Moving the Ark to Jerusalem brings the primary symbol of Israel's relationship with the Lord to the nation's capital. It also helps to establish David as the new leader of the Israelites.

The joyful procession of the Ark to Jerusalem is suddenly interrupted by the unexpected death of Uzzah when he reached out his hand to steady the Ark on the cart. To lay a casual hand on the sacred Ark is considered a sacrilege. Only those specially appointed can touch the Ark. Having realized his mistake, Uzzah may have suffered a heart attack and died. In those times, the narrators invariably saw God as causing things that we today would otherwise attribute to natural causes. The lesson to be taken from this sad event is that people need to approach God and the things of God with great reverence and respect. The event scared David so much that he postpones bringing the Ark to Jerusalem for a few months.

Verses 11-33—David's wife scorns him for dancing before the Ark. When David hears that the presence of the Ark in the house of Obadiah has become a big blessing for that family, he takes it as a signal that it is now okay for him to bring it to the nation's capital. This time, he is careful to show respect for the Ark by offering sacrifice.

When the Ark comes into Jerusalem, David dances with joy. Some Catholic writers and homilists have compared the Ark carrying the presence of God to Mary pregnant with Jesus. Also, the joy of the people and David at seeing the Ark coming into Jerusalem could be compared to the joy of Elizabeth when Mary brings the glory of God into her presence. Furthermore, the dance of David before the Ark anticipates the leap of joy of John the Baptist in his mother's womb when Jesus in Mary's womb comes into his presence.

One person totally unable to share David's joy is his wife Michal (Saul's daughter). When she sees David, dressed lightly and dancing without restraint, she *"despised him in her heart"* (v.16). It seems this moment painfully reminds Michal that God has chosen David as king and rejected her father Saul (v.21). Michal's attitude towards the king is punished by her being made barren—another sign that the house of Saul has no future in Israel.

Pause: Is Catholic worship too "cerebral"? Should we use our bodies more in our worship of God?

CHAPTER 7: Nathan's prophecy

"Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne stands firm forever." (v.16)

2 Samuel 7 is regarded as one of the most important texts in the Old Testament. Commenting on this text, the *Catholic Bible—Personal Study Editors* states: *"God's promise to David of an eternal dynasty becomes the basis for Israel's expectation of a Messiah after the Davidic dynasty abruptly comes to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The New Testament sees Nathan's prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David. This text climaxes the story of David's rise to power and prepares the way for the future that will be shaped largely by David's dynasty"* (p.120).

This chapter consists of a divine oracle (vv 1-17) and a prayer response by David (vv 18-29).

Verses 1-17—divine oracle. Now that the Lord has given David rest from his enemies, he has time for reflection. He calls in his prophet Nathan and says to him, *"Here I am living in a lovely palace, while the ark of God rests in a tent"* (v.2). Nathan responds: if you are thinking about building something real pretty for God, go ahead and the Lord will be with you! But that night, the Lord visits Nathan and pulls the permit on David's project.

The Lord tells Nathan that he has no desire to be domesticated in a big building. God likes the freedom to come and go. The image of God portrayed in verses 5-7 reminds me of the gypsies in Ireland who refused to be housed. They like the freedom to move from place to place. While we can and do celebrate God's presence in sacred buildings, God's presence can never be restricted to such places.

Verses 8-16. God reveals to Nathan his plans for David. In the divine oracle, we note the following:

- *God's election of David*, a nobody, to be king of Israel (v.8).
- God's protection of David from his enemies (vv 9-10).
- God's intention to make the house of David famous among the peoples of the earth.
- God's plan to have David's son, Solomon, build him a temple (vv 12-13).
- God's desire to have a father-son relationship with David's descendants. While God will punish sin, he will not withdraw his favor from David's sons as he did with Saul (vv 14-15).
- God's promise of a perpetual dynasty. *"Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand forever"* (v.16). A comment on the time frame "forever." In one sense, it may have meant "a very long time." David's line of kings lasted four hundred years, a timespan that amply fulfilled the prophecy. But "forever" can also be taken to be literally true when we focus on Jesus as the Son of David, whose reign knows no end. Once David's dynasty ended in 586 B.C., devout Jews continued to treasure the divine promises made to David, confident that God would eventually fulfill them in a very special son of David whom they called the Messiah. So rather than David building a house for God's Ark of the Covenant, God had a much bigger plan—one that involved building a house (a dynasty) for David, one that would last forever.

Pause: Have you ever had a "prophetic experience", or experience which changed the course of your life?

Verses 18-29—David's prayer of thanksgiving. In response to the divine oracle, David comes before the Ark and prays. In his prayer, we note the following:

- With deference and humility, David contrasts his own littleness to God's greatness and magnificence.
- David is grateful for God's awesome and generous promises to him.

- In a world where many gods are worshipped, David professes that there is no god like Israel's God. In verses 25-29, we detect a note of boldness in David's prayer: Now, Lord, that you have made this wonderful promise to me and my descend-ants, I hope that you will be true to your word.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 7? What can we learn about prayer from David's prayer?

CHAPTERS 8-10: David's expands his empire and becomes the ideal king

"David reigned over all Israel, judging and administering justice to all his people." (v.15)

The focus of chapter 8 is the expansion of David's empire (vv 1-14) and the development of David's bureaucracy (vv 15-18). Because the Lord is with him (v.14), David defeats all his enemies. He also rules Israel with justice (v.15). David is presented as the ideal king.

In chapter 9, David shows a great kindness to Jonathan's crippled son. In ancient times, new kings usually killed all relatives of the former king to eliminate any potential rival to the throne. In this story, David shows himself to be a different kind of king. In showing love and kindness to Meribbaal, David is keeping an oath that he made to Jonathan in 1Sam 20:14-17. In a way, this story anticipates Jesus' invitation to the lame and the crippled and the outsiders to come sit at his table (Lk 14:7-14). In chapter 10, David defeats the Ammonites and Arameans.