

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 20. Israel Comes of Age.

Disappointment can lead to depression and lethargy. The aged Samuel may have felt that with the failure of Saul as a godly king, his work was done. But God had not forgotten Israel or His promise to provide a new leader; now was the time for action. 1 Samuel 16 begins a new chapter in this history, when God said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. ***I have chosen*** one of his sons to be king."

Though a seasoned old warrior, Samuel's faith was still tested by God. It would have been dangerous to pass through Saul's territory to Bethlehem, and why didn't God tell him straight out which of Jesse's sons He had chosen? However old we grow we can never boast that our faith is complete!

It is a heart-lifting scene. Seven upright and seemingly worthy sons of Jesse paraded before Samuel but with a prophet's insight Samuel knew that God had not chosen any of those. His trust in God must have been stretched as he asked Jesse if he had any more sons than these. Ah yes, there was just one, the runt of the litter, the youngest, relegated to looking after the sheep, and not considered important enough to be included in the family service of sacrifice. "Send for him," orders Samuel. "We will not sit down until he arrives."

And so, enter David, young, handsome and glowing with health and fitness. "Rise and anoint him," God tells Samuel, "he is the one." Verse 13 sums up the divine touch on this new dynasty; "So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power." Thus begins the story of Israel's greatest king, the man Samuel described in 1 Samuel 13:14 as "a man after God's own heart." We find in him a firm and unshakeable trust in Jehovah, the brightest and most spiritual view of the creation and government of the world, and a constant, tender and sensitive awe of the Holy One of Israel. His life would have its failures but also its heartfelt repentance, and whether in the heights of happiness or the depths of despair, David's thoughts tended always, like a homing pigeon, to praise and reliance upon his God. No wonder God felt it worthwhile to spend 30 years preparing David for his reign of 40 years!

To the human eye Saul was the ideal choice for a king, while David would be best left as a shepherd boy. Just goes to prove the truth of 1 Samuel 16:7 – "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Camouflage doesn't deceive God! It is also interesting to note that Saul came from the tribe of Benjamin, whereas the prophecy of Jacob in Genesis 49:9,10 – "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" - points to the king of Israel who was to arise from the tribe of Judah with his line culminating in the King of kings.

Verse 14 shows the beginning of David's apprenticeship. The same Spirit of the Lord who had come upon David, had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit came quickly to fill the vacuum. In the amazing planning of God, Saul's servants found a harpist to play for Saul and soothe his nerves whenever the evil spirit took hold of him. That harpist was David; for him it was an introduction to the royal court – quite an education for a rustic youth – and the opportunity to make many friends of high political standing.

Chapter 17 must surely be one of the best-loved stories of all time! To save expense and bloodshed, nations at war would sometimes put forward a champion each to do the fighting for them, the victorious champion signifying victory to the respective nation. But with a champion such as the giant Goliath, the Israelites' hearts melted; gone was their trust in God – defeat was inevitable. But once again God's timing was perfect. David came to the battlefield not out of curiosity or mischief, but in obedience to his father, in time to hear the challenge of Goliath and see the fear of the soldiers.

But in David the Spirit of the Lord prompted a different response (verse 26) – "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Neither the false accusation of his eldest brother or the incredulity of Saul could deter him; with implicit trust in God he told Saul he would fight

Goliath himself. Unmoved by the doubts of the Israelites or the sneers of the Philistines, David uttered those immortal words of verses 45-47, "I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel."

And God honoured his faith. Verses 34-37 show how his job as a shepherd had given him courage and strength. Much necessary practice with his slingshot had perfected his aim. Goliath threw back his head in a laughing taunt to this cheeky upstart, exposing his forehead under the helmet brim. David's aim with a sling was brilliant, the stone hitting that one small spot in Goliath's head that was unprotected. As Goliath crashed to the ground David finished off the job, beheading the giant with Goliath's own sword. That of course was the signal for the Philistine army to flee, with the Israelite army in hot pursuit. A great battle was won by Israel that day.

That marked a turning point in David's life, as we see in Chapter 18. Saul appropriated David and his talents for his own service, not just as a musician but as an army leader ever successful in his forays into Philistine territory. An unexpected bonus was the friendship of Saul's godly son Jonathan who "became one in spirit with David, and loved him as himself." In fact in verse 3 Jonathan – although the expected heir to Saul's throne – made a covenant with David, endowing him with his own robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt, all symbols of the kingship which he selflessly renounced for love of his friend. Perhaps, in God's good grace, He had arranged for Jonathan to give David the love of a brother - something apparently denied him from his own brothers.

Sadly Saul's favour towards the outstanding David was marred by an unreasoning jealousy. Saul's daughter Michal fell in love with David and Saul allowed the marriage in the hope that she would be able to trick him into some disaster. But with every success or good fortune David had, Saul's jealousy festered towards insanity, and eventually to save his own life this son-in-law of the king had to flee the palace and take up the life of a fugitive. Meanwhile Jonathan held unwaveringly to his covenant.

Can you imagine David's feelings at his enforced demise? What had gone wrong? Where was God now? Often in his psalms he speaks of his utter despair. For David it was a steep learning curve, yet one which served to strengthen his faith in God and fit him for the role of king. God had not left him; the constancy of Jonathan was the golden thread in a dark tapestry. And how many thousands of us have taken comfort and strength from his beloved psalms?

In Chapter 22 we see David holed up in the cave of Abdullam and there his father and brothers came to support this shepherd boy whose rise to fame had brought him unjust persecution. Many people were disillusioned by the imperfections of Saul's reign and verse 2 says "All those in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About 400 men were with him." The number soon grew to 600 and Chapters 23-30 show how, through a demanding and stressful time, David moulded this group of malcontents into a disciplined force supremely loyal to this man who led them in sync with the laws of God. God's purpose for David was being fulfilled as the skills he had learnt as a shepherd of guidance, provision, healing and constant care were being developed into skills of diplomacy, wisdom, strength and compassion that would stand him in good stead as a king. And when in fear of Saul David sometimes took refuge in Philistine territory, he would have also gained much useful knowledge of warfare and iron-working. His son Solomon would in time build refineries near the Gulf of Aqaba. Above all, this was a time when David learnt more about God and deepened his commitment of faith and obedience to his beloved Master.

Chapter 31 records the fatal battle with the Philistines in which Jonathan and his 2 brothers were killed and Saul himself committed suicide. We might think that this news would cause relief and rejoicing, but not so with David. With the grace of forgiveness, with magnanimity and tenderness, he mourned for Saul as the Lord's anointed along with his dearest friend Jonathan. There was no taunt of personal triumph; instead David composed a lament that he ordered to be sung throughout Israel, lauding the qualities of both men. It was a loving gesture that helped the divided nation back to unity and in Psalm 18, verse 46 he gives

thanks to the One Who had been with him in all those difficult years - "The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Saviour!"

The path was clear now for David to succeed to the throne. But civil war was still making the nation of Israel unstable and it was imperative that David seek guidance from the Lord as to his next move. In 2 Samuel Chapter 2 the Lord sent him to Hebron, the most important city of Judah, where the people of his own tribe gladly welcomed their local hero. David was now 30 years old; 15 years after his private anointing by Samuel, he was anointed publicly as king of Judah.

But the northern tribes (known collectively as Israel to distinguish them from Judah) were still loyal to Saul; Abner, Saul's army commander, put Saul's forty-year-old son Ish-bosheth on the throne and declared him to be king. The civil war was to drag on for another 7 years but in Chapter 3 Ish-bosheth accused Abner of trying to wrest the throne from him and a furious Abner capitulated completely to David, setting things in motion for David to be acknowledged by both Judah and Israel. In Chapter 4, 2 of Saul's henchmen murdered Ish-bosheth and David's honest anger at that deed helped again to re-unify the nation. It was usual in that culture for a succeeding king to kill off the family of his predecessor to prevent any uprising, but far from following that custom, we will see in Chapter 9 that David sought out Jonathan's crippled son Mephibosheth, restored Saul's land to him, gave him a lifelong pension and a place at the king's table.

It seems a tragedy that the noble Jonathan should die on the battlefield at the dawn of a glorious era. But God had His plan. Ish-bosheth's falling out with Abner set the stage for the reunification of Judah with Israel. If Jonathan had been alive, Abner would no doubt have wanted him on the throne in Israel, though it's doubtful that Jonathan would have committed such a breach of the covenant he had made with David re the kingship. Ishbosheth was little more than Abner's pawn and when he died Israel was quite prepared to join with Judah under the popular David. But if the noble Jonathan had been Israel's king, it is not likely that Israel would have wanted to depose him in favour of Judah's David. Among many there would have been a division of loyalties. God's agenda was for one nation led by the king who had descended from the tribe of Judah, not to be shared with a king from the tribe of Benjamin. Jonathan had served God's purpose well and he would have been rewarded well where it really counted - in Heaven. God is sovereign of history, whether we realise it or not.

Back to Chapter 5, where all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and acknowledged him as their leader, quoting the Lord's own word, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler." David knew that he must rule them only under the supreme rule of God. He made a pact with Israel and they gave him his third anointing. He was now 38; in total he reigned for 40 years, until he was 70.

One of David's strategic moves in his early reign was to capture the city of Jerusalem; on the border between Israel and Judah, it afforded neutral ground and dispelled any local jealousies. This city of the Jebusites was set on a hill, almost impregnable, but Joab, commander of David's army, and his brave men found their way up through the water shaft and conquered the city. David took up residence there and called it the City of David. He became more and more powerful and respected among neighbouring nations, yet always had a heart for the people as with humility he led them in the worship of God.

In particular Israel enjoyed friendly relations with Phoenicia; Israel dominated the inland trade routes to the capital Tyre, and Tyre depended on Israelite agriculture for much of its food. So it is interesting to see in 5:11 that Hiram king of Tyre sent David a goodwill gift of cedar logs, along with carpenters and stonemasons, to build David a palace. As the possession of a palace was an important symbol of a king's status, David took that as a confirmation from the Lord that He had indeed established him as king and exalted his kingdom for the sake, not only of himself, but also of his people Israel.

When the Philistines saw David was gaining power they were aroused to fight against him, but never once did David go to war without first consulting God as to what his strategy should be and on this occasion God told him not to go straight up but to circle the Philistines and attack them in front of the balsam trees. It worked and David's army struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer. Plunder included gold, silver and bronze articles, all of which David dedicated to the Lord for use in His worship.

In Chapter 6 we see another significant strategy of David; Jerusalem was his home as king, but it must also be the centre of worship, the home of God, the king of Israel. Ever the diplomat he sought the co-operation of the leaders and the people in a huge joint venture to bring the Ark of the Covenant back into the centre of their national life. David set up a special tent for the Ark and entered into the jubilant procession with unbounded enthusiasm as the priests carried the Ark to its new resting place. Psalm 24 could have been composed for this occasion. It was customary to make sacrifices and give gifts of food to the people at the coronation of a king; David dispensed to each person a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins, to demonstrate that God was their King and the Ark was His throne.

In Chapter 7 David's battles were on hold and he had time for contemplation. It was then that he realised the inconsistency of his living in a palace while the Ark of God had only a tent. He should build a house worthy of his great God. God responded – not to the action, but to the intent of David's faithful heart. The prophet Nathan came to him with a message that would ring out through the rest of Jewish history and beyond; God was about to make a covenant with him! His message was, "I took you from the pasture ... to be ruler over My people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone. Now I will make your name great ... and I will provide a place for My people Israel ... The Lord declares to you that the Lord Himself will establish a house for you I will raise up your offspring ... and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for My Name. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before Me; your throne will be established forever." David was overcome and humbly praised his God. "Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that You have brought me this far? How great You are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like You ... And now, Lord God, keep forever the promise You have made concerning Your servant and his house ... so that Your Name will be great forever."

This chapter 7 is one of the most important in the Old Testament, because it affects all that follows in the history of mankind. David could not know what great honour God was giving him, to be the progenitor of a royal line which would have its fulfilment in Christ! In Heaven I am sure he now considers it was worth the stony path he had to take to get there! And note verses 9-11; as with Abraham, David was blessed so that he could bless others.

In Chapter 8:15 we read "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people." As a reigning monarch he was an able administrator as well as a diplomat and military strategist. He reorganised his kingdom efficiently and set in place the machinery for good and fair government. He organised sacred music for public worship and himself supplied many of the hymns for the singers and musicians. He organised teams of priests and Levites to minister before the Ark and at the tabernacle of the Lord which was still standing in Gibeon, to offer burnt offerings and praises to God "in accordance with everything written in the Law of the Lord which He had given Israel." (1 Chronicles 16:40) There were still battles with neighbouring nations but "the Lord gave David victory wherever he went," (8:6) and he was able to extend his empire north to the River Euphrates, south to the Gulf of Aqaba and west across to the Brook of Egypt – fulfilling the promise God had made to Abraham 1,000 years before.

And so the nation of Israel had made its grand escape – from one family exploring a foreign land, from a bunch of slaves in Egypt, from a complaining rabble wandering in the wilderness, to a nation established and successful, at peace at last and respected by its neighbours, and under the godly rule of David, a nation who could in reality be called "the chosen people of God," a nation with the high calling of providing the stage for the earthly ministry of David's greatest Son, Jesus Christ the King of kings.