

George Philip Bible Readings

The Book of Samuel II

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1:1-16

We are dealing here with a significant development in the story of Israel. The old order, in which by the providence of God Saul was king, was giving way to the new developing order under the kingship of David. The transition was not a smooth one, for it took place in the context of battles, death, deceit and great sorrow. This is how it often is in personal life and in the developing of the work of the Gospel. The New Testament speaks of "travail" by which new life comes into being (Gal. 4:19), tribulations that are inescapable (Rom.5:3), and fellowship in the sufferings of Christ (Phil.3:10). We must not be surprised because the work of God goes on in the real world, involving people whose personalities and lives are very complicated. It is not always easy to see what God is doing or why things happen in a certain way, and those involved find their feelings deep and perplexing. David is here told the news of the death of Saul and Jonathan, David's closest and most prized friend. The account given by the Amalekite escapee differs from what we have read in the previous chapter and it would seem that the man was seeking to curry favour with David in bringing proof of Saul's death. Pagan though he was, he may well have been aware of David's destiny as king. Some people outside the work of the church know a whole lot about what is going on, especially if it is discreditable and capable of being "used" for their own ends. The man's scheme recoiled on him because he had done what David had consistently refused to do, even though he had good grounds for doing it. The Amalekite claimed to have killed Saul, the Lord's anointed. Yes, Saul was a wicked man doing great evil against both David and the people of God. But it was God's place to exercise judgment, not man's.

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1:1-16

Before we go on to David's eulogy regarding Saul, we must ponder the intensity of his mourning. Humanly speaking, if your worst enemy and the greatest barrier to your service of God is removed, it should be a cause for rejoicing. But the issue is not so simple. Think, for example, of our Lord Jesus weeping over the Jerusalem that had rejected Him and was soon to crucify Him (Luke 19:41). His heart was saying, "Oh that it could have been otherwise!" Think of David in the same way. He found no pleasure in the death of the wicked king. This is a genuine reaction because, after all, God Himself has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would have all come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). David was not in any sense closing his eyes to the evil of Saul's life but he had been involved with Saul in so many ways for so long and had seen so much potential in him. David had also seen the increasing hold the powers of darkness had on Saul's life and may well have prayed long and hard for Saul's deliverance. Think of the heartache of a minister who has preached for years to someone whom he loved and then, at the funeral service, is aware that, as far as he knows, his friend resisted the Gospel and never came to faith in Christ. What deep grief is felt at such a time. "Oh that it had been otherwise!" Of course David had also lost his loyal friend Jonathan whom, perhaps, he had hoped to have as his right hand man when he became king. David also mourned for the many who had been killed in Saul's last battle, and for the harm and hurt done to the whole nation. David was not a "detached" king, leader and shepherd. He was involved with his people as every true minister must be. David loved God's people and God's work and he may well have been pondering just how easily his own life might have gone astray as a result of his wrong actions, reactions and impulsive decisions. Perhaps David was already sensing the burden of responsibility that was to be his for the future. If he was to be a good king then he needed to be kept by the grace of God.

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1:17-27

David's lamentation or memorial tribute to Saul is an amazing eulogy with no mention of the dark side of Saul's character nor of his bitter nastiness and constant persecution. This was not hypocrisy, nor did David speak well of Saul just in order to speak affectionately about Jonathan. The whole address was spoken in the context of God's calling of His people Israel, God's dealings with them and His purposes for them. David's words were for God's people in God's presence and not to be spoken of among the heathen, because it was no business of theirs and would simply allow them in their ignorance to mock the God of Israel (20). After all, the Philistines knew how more than once David had fled to them from Saul's persecution. Yes, there had been failure in Saul's life,

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and as a result Saul and his son and many other mighty men lay dead on the battle-field. This seems to be the emphasis in v.19 referring to “the glory of Israel” having been slain. The defeat had been a great national disaster and three times (19, 25, 27) David exclaims that the mighty had fallen. In many ways Saul and Jonathan had served the nation well and father and son were worthy of admiration (23). But for the dark and satanic influences which Saul yielded to they might have been a truly wonderful partnership. Of course, Saul and Jonathan had been divided over the question of David and it seems David ended his tribute by thinking of the love and loyalty of Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:30-34; 23: 16-18). There are those who read into David's words in v.26 a suggestion that his relationship with Jonathan was over-emotional and even unhealthy but this is not the case. The deep bonds were due to the fact that the two men had come through many costly experiences together and this forges a relationship that works for good in terms of spiritual service. Others suggest that David disparages the love of a woman. This may be the case, but we must remember that he already had two wives and later a relationship with Bathsheba that was triggered off by a moment of lust (2 Sam. 11:2). But neither kings nor commoners have the right to go against God's pattern for relationships, which is one man and one woman for life-long, loving loyalty. Scripture and history testify to the personal chaos and hindrance to God's work when relationships are not pleasing to God.

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2:1-7

With the death of Saul who died rejected by God, the way was now open for David to take his rightful place as king, for which he had been anointed by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13). The nation was divided, as we shall see, and David was to have many troubles as well as victories, and the troubles came soon. That is not surprising because the Devil knew full well the advantage to be gained by attacking a new work before it has time to settle its foundations. New converts, new missionaries, and ministers newly into their first charge do well to be on guard. David was treading wisely and warily here and he looked for clear and specific guidance regarding the way ahead. He was seeking not permission but a positive directive from God. He knew God had ordained him to be king but there was no snatching at the position or the privilege. Nor was there an over-confident attitude that would go barging ahead, even though David knew he had a well-trained army of mighty men prepared to die for him. We see here a man who has learned that the good of the work of God and the well-being of the people have far greater priority than any personal advancement. From his own experience David had learned how one rash decision and action could lead to a long spell of confusion and complication in God's work. It may not be totally accurate to speak of the work of a sovereign God being delayed but, portrayed in human terms, that is something that can happen, as is illustrated in the story of Abraham. Then, because of an impetuous action, perhaps nagged at by his wife, we find that between Gen. 16:15-16 and Gen 17:1 a spell of thirteen years passed, years about which nothing significant is recorded. Perhaps it took all that time for Abraham to learn what David here seems to have learned, that step by step we must seek and know God's will before the step is taken. This was just the initial move forward which led to David becoming king over the house of Judah, his own people. Even though it seemed a natural development David wanted God's confirmation.

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2:8-11

Look back to the previous passage and recognise that David's generous commendation of the men of Jabesh Gilead may have had a wise political motive as well as a genuine one of friendship. The new king would do well to win over the men who had been so respectful of Saul (1 Sam. 31:11-13). After all, David had been very willing to recognise the gifts, qualities and service of Saul even though the man had opposed and persecuted him. David's attitude to these men would become known and would perhaps win over others who might have been hesitating with regard to who should have their support. Some people can be won over by friendship. Grace as well as truth serves the cause of God, and this needs to be remembered by people whose technique is always to attack those who do not subscribe in total to their own position. This does not ignore the fact that evil men are against all that belongs to God and against those who are loyal to God. Right from the start of David's reign radical opposition emerged. Saul's commander took Saul's son Ishbosheth and set him up as king over the tribes other than Judah. Ishbosheth lasted only two years and he was a weak character easily used as a tool by

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Abner. We must see the situation in stark spiritual terms. God made David king and Abner made another man king. The basic conflict was not between Abner and David but between Abner and God. Abner refused to recognise or to submit to what God was doing. No doubt he will have justified his actions to himself and to others, claiming to be interested only in justice so that Saul's only remaining natural son should succeed to the throne. Perhaps Abner thought that if weak Ishbosheth was king, he himself would be the real power behind the throne. He had an axe to grind and that is always dangerous in the context of the work of God. You can end up fighting against God, and you will be bound to lose (Acts 5:33-39).

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2:12-32

We have been told in v.10-11 that the nation was divided and that David reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years. What we now read is an account of the civil war during that time. Abner was a blood relation of Saul. Joab, David's commander, Abishai and Asahel were sons of David's half-sister. There were therefore family loyalties involved and when this is the case spiritual issues can be clouded. It is difficult, for example, to recognise honestly that a husband, son, daughter or even a close friend is adrift from God and acting contrary to God. We need to be close to God if we are to be objective in our assessments and willing to act accordingly, regardless of the cost. A look at a map will show that Abner and his men were far from Mahanaim if they were at Gibeon, and this suggests they were looking for trouble. It seems from v.13-14 that something began almost as a sporting contest but its ferocity soon led beyond representative contest to outright war. Perhaps both sides had this in mind from the beginning and if so we are dealing with calculated scheming in the context of the work of God. No doubt both sides felt strongly that they were in the right but when "convictions" take possession of a man or woman the "passion" to achieve the planned objective can over-rule all wisdom. We can become blind to everything and everyone including God and, feeling ourselves totally in the right, we can pursue our aim deaf to every entreaty to caution or moderation. We see something of this in v.19 in the single mindedness of Asahel who was not satisfied with the victory that had sent Abner and his men in flight. Perhaps Asahel wanted the glory of killing the leader of the enemy. Perhaps his desire was the humiliation of Abner. We cannot tell. But he was deaf to all entreaty and warning. It seems Abner was in fact reluctant to kill Asahel, but in the end was forced to do so. For a moment this made everyone stop. That is a good thing to do, if we take time to think about what we are doing and what we have set in motion.

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2:12-32

It is easy to start something in a burst of righteous enthusiasm but situations tend to acquire a momentum of their own and the Devil is quick to see opportunity to further the confusion. The Devil is always happy when the people of God are at war among themselves. Regardless of the actual issue, when confrontation has been established people seem to become unwilling to yield even the smallest point and as a result the attention of both sides is taken up with their quarrel and the on-going work of God is forgotten. What we have to see in the second half of the passage is the operation of the providence of God. We may question Abner's motives in suggesting peace and we may accuse him of hypocrisy in blaming Joab for prolonging the war (26) because, after all, it was Abner and his army that started the conflict. In v.27, choosing his words wisely, and still laying the blame for starting the trouble on Abner, Joab agreed to peace and both armies returned to their respective cities. This does not mean that lasting peace had been made, as we shall see at the start of the next chapter. But it does teach us that there is a time to withdraw even if it means people get the wrong impression and assume that we have been defeated. Different times and different situations call for different actions. Read Eccles. 3:1-8 and think well. We can be in the right doctrinally and yet take action at the wrong time. We need to guard against self-will lest we obscure God's will. The uncrucified ego of even a Christian man can work such complication that it can lead the work of God to the brink of disaster. Even great servants of God are not immune to the temptation of rash speaking (Ps.106:32-33). Think how rashly Peter took the sword in Gethsemane (John18:10-11). His intentions were eagerly sincere but he was wrong. Think of John so eager to challenge and rebuke those regarded as being not quite on the right lines (John 9:49-50). We have spoken often of how we need to "learn to lose with God", because God never loses. It only seems so at times.

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3:1-5

This passage is in two parts. In v.1 we have a summary or description of the prevailing situation of war between the house of Saul, rejected by God, and the house of David, ordained by God for a significant future. It is interesting to note that David was not mentioned at all in the previous chapter which told of the start of open civil war. In v.2-5 we have information about David's personal and domestic situation which, of course, had great bearing and influence on the course of the spiritual battle. From now on we have to see and assess situations and people in the context of what was manifestly spiritual warfare. We are told of six sons born to six wives and this tells us something of an area of weakness in David's character. What attracted him he desired, and he would not be denied his satisfaction. There is a suggestion by some that David met and "married" Maacah during the time of his earlier lapse from faith and obedience recorded in 1 Sam.27:1-3, 7-8. If this is so, then we see how straying from God's will can introduce complications to our lives and service because, later in the story, Absalom the son of Maacah proved a sore trial to David. Adonijah, son of the fourth wife, proved a trouble maker to the work of God in David's old age (1 Kings 1:5), seeking the throne in place of Solomon. Why do we assume that our sins, once forgiven, will not have consequences that may go on for a long time? We do not in any sense minimise the glory and wonder of forgiveness, cleansing and restoration. But, when we stray from the centre of God's will and form relationships which God cannot and will not bless, then we may have to live with the issue of our decisions. "Be sure your sins will find *you* out" even though these sins may never be found out by other people (Numbers 32:23).

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3:6-11

The fact that this was a long war may have some real connection with David's personal and domestic situation. Perhaps if his life had been less complicated the purposes of God would have worked out more speedily. Our way of life cannot be separated from our service. What we are in relation to God determines the quality of our service (Acts 20:18; 2 Cor. 4:2). But it was bound to be a long war because it was not merely a human conflict for the throne but a basic spiritual battle in which every development of the work of God was opposed by the powers and persons of evil. We must see clearly that behind evil men who oppose God and the Gospel there operates the Devil himself. If we see this we will be able to face and deal with people with greater humanity and grace, recognising that they are dupes of the Devil. This does not excuse their evil deeds, but it helps God's servants to keep calm and to be realistic. Without doubt the kingdom of evil is powerful, but it is a defeated kingdom, and the Devil has only a short time and limited room for his operations (Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:12; Job 1:12; 2:6). But we are also shown here that the Devil's kingdom is not a stable one, nor a disciplined one. Abner, being the power behind the throne of Ishbosheth, felt free to hold both law and tradition in contempt and he took one of Saul's concubines. All the people would know that this signified Abner was acting as if he were king. When the weak Ishbosheth protested, Abner's anger was great. He resented any criticism of his actions and he turned on the king telling him, truthfully, that he was king only because Abner had put him there. He uttered his threat to hand over the kingdom to David, and Ishbosheth was afraid. It must be terrible to be aware that you are in the power of another man who is evil. Remember that threats are another of the Devil's stratagems. Safety and peace are found in keeping close to God.

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3:12-21

We must not fail to see that in and through all these complicated human situations and developments God was working out His sovereign purposes without ever being complicit in evil (Jas. 1:13). It seems that Abner had decided that his future lay with David, though we are not sure what his reasons were. During his time as commander with Saul he had seen that gifted king changing his tactics again and again to achieve his ambitious end and Abner may simply have been calculating where he might gain position. He changed sides quickly and radically, and declared his willingness and ability to bring all Israel over to David's side. There is such an emphasis on what Abner was going to do that we must see his pride, and in his dealing with Michal's husband we see his ruthlessness. He was not going to let a man's sorrow in losing his wife stand in the way of his plans. It seems that Abner was very conscious of being the one who was handling the whole situation, almost taking it out of the hand of David, let alone out of the hand of God. Perhaps he was seeking to make David feel under

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obligation to him so that he would get a prominent place in the united kingdom. Now, when you see a man or a woman manipulating both circumstances and people, and showing a real lack of understanding of and compassion for other people's feelings, it is best to have caution regarding that man or woman's spiritual language. In v.17-18 Abner was making public profession regarding the fact that David was indeed anointed of God to be king, and it may be that he was now recognising that there had been ample evidence to confirm that God was indeed with David. But Abner seems to have forgotten that he had deliberately set up Ishbosheth over against David. He had defied God quite deliberately and there is no indication of any real repentance. Keep in mind that Abner's change of course began with an angry reaction when he was rebuked for doing wrong.

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3:22-30

Note that in v.21 and 22 it is emphasised that David had sent Abner away in peace, and it seems David hurried him away before Joab returned. If this was so, then David was also manipulating the situation and there seems to be no sign of anything being referred to God in prayer. In spite of now having six wives David seems still to be smarting over the loss of Michal whom he had loved deeply (1 Sam. 18:20; 25:44). His desire to have her back may have been simply David's selfish desire or it may have been a political move hoping that once again married to Saul's daughter he would have more appeal to those who had earlier supported Saul. There seems little to choose between the motivation of David, Abner and Joab. None of them seem to have been living to the glory of God. None of them seem to have been trusting God for their lives and work. David and Abner had got what they wanted and felt they had the situation under control. But it would not be all that long until Michal proved to be a great sorrow to David spiritually (6:16). Again we have a warning about relationships based only on attraction and romance without spiritual compatibility. When we come to v.23-25 we see first of all that David intended keeping the pact with Abner secret from Joab, and we see the growing power of Joab who had no hesitation in challenging the king with a real note of rebuke in his words. David may well have been aware of and disturbed by the growing power of his commander in chief and this may have been a factor in making an ally of Abner. It is all very "political" and that is no way to lead God's work. How different it would have been if David had been spiritually decisive. He would have to become a man like that for the future and the things happening here are the crucible and fire to purge and prepare God's man for his life's service.

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3:22-30

Following the last comment in yesterday's reading, read Jas. 1:2-4 and Jer.18:1-4, two passages among others that help us to understand God's dealings with us. God prepares His servants for the future, just as He prepares the future for them, and it is important that we should be aware of this and be learning all God is seeking to teach us. Think of Joab, in whom David had put great trust. Without knowing of the discussion Abner had had with David Joab accused him bluntly of spying; and treachery (24-25). Joab did not wait for explanations. His one thought was revenge for the killing of his brother Asahel (2:23). When the messengers reached Abner he turned back in all innocence, assuming David had sent for him, and he was murdered in cold blood. As soon as David heard the news he publicly protested his innocence and pronounced a solemn judgment and curse on Joab's house. Of course, if Abner's motives had been pure, David should there and then have brought Joab to trial and punishment, but it was not done. Perhaps Joab and his supporters were already too powerful and if that was the case then David must take some of the blame for allowing his rightful leadership to be qualified. David cannot have been without his regrets about the whole complicated situation, but regrets are not really creative. Repentance which brings a man back to God can be the catalyst that begins to change the whole situation. Remorse, on the other hand, which is usually mixed with self-pity, is always negative and can lead to even further complications (2 Cor. 7:10). We are about to see the beginning of a change in David, but it is not without cost.

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3:31-39

There was real courage in David's calling all the people to mourn the death of Abner and in his praising the man publicly. It is, of course, very difficult to disentangle all the threads of this story, and with limited knowledge

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we must not make hasty judgments. David was taking real trouble to make it plain that he had no part in the murder and this may indicate that there was an element of suspicion among the people. Much as they admired their king, they knew his weaknesses and were aware that he did not have full control of the situation in which he was called to be leader. The official mourning must have been a real public rebuke to Joab and his family, and David may have wondered what reaction there would be. If we link David's tears and mourning with his words in v.39, we begin to see a man who was worn down emotionally by the relentless demands of God's work together with the draining of energy that is the result of not being right with God. There is no doubt at all that David was aware of the privilege of being the leader of God's work and he was aware of the value of that work and its significance for the future. In New Testament terms a stewardship of God's work had been committed to him (1 Cor. 4:1-2) and he was aware that he had allowed himself, and consequently the work of God, to fall under the influence of wrong men. He sensed the evil potential of those who sought to manage and manipulate him and in the interest of the work, far more than in the interest of his own peace of mind and heart and his safety, he turned to God. It is always a good and hopeful sign when people under pressure, and conscious of their failures, turn to God. That is the beginning of realism and signifies hope for future service. It is all too easy to live in dread of those who are against the work of God and who seem to be ever scheming and doing so with impunity. David reminds us that God will deal with all such. This is not vindictiveness. It is fact. Read Job 34:21-22; Ps. 73:1-18; Rom. 12:14-19. [Back to Top](#)

4:1-12

It is doubtful if Ishbosheth had any real respect for Abner but he knew that without the man's backing he was too weak to reign. If he assumed that David had engineered Abner's death he may well have wondered if he was next on the "hit list". Apart from the introduction to the poor crippled son of Jonathan, the whole chapter has to do with the grim end of Ishbosheth at the hands of two of his own captains. Perhaps these two wicked men knew of Abner's decision to defect to David and now that Abner was dead they may have realised there was no future for them with Ishbosheth. In order to seek favour with David they decided to dispose of the king and present themselves to David as men who had removed a significant barrier to his becoming king of the whole nation. David would have no part in this kind of thing. This was not the way God had brought him thus far. All along David had refused to lay hands on Saul, leaving his judgment and removal in God's hands where it rightly and safely belonged. David would have no part in the attitude that says the end justifies the means. Shall we do evil that good may come? No! Those who take that line are rightly condemned (Rom. 3:8). In the previous chapter David was weak and did not bring Joab to judgment, but here his action was swift and decisive. He told the murderers in v.9 that all the actions and motives of men are known to the God who had redeemed his life and brought him through all his trials and difficulties. He was warning all who heard him that unholy hands laid on God's work will meet their judgment. He was saying to all of us who have any part to play in the outworking of God's will in this world, "Perish policy and cunning, perish all that fears the light." If our actions cannot stand out in the open in God's clear light, then they are not of God.

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5:1-5

This passage tells of how the whole nation came together under David as king, and it all seems to have happened very simply. But we must remember that under the baneful influence of Abner the northern tribes had held out against David for over seven years and only now, when both Abner and Saul's sons were dead, did they decide that their best interests lay with David. However, their motivation may not have been as self-centred as this suggests because their words in v.1-2 seem to indicate a real spiritual recognition. They looked back (often a good and necessary thing to do) and acknowledged that even during Saul's reign the whole nation owed a great debt to David. There is a lesson here because when we get established spiritually we can so easily forget those whose costly service made it all possible. Indeed, we may even devalue those who ministered, led, fed and taught us in the things of God. If the tribes were thinking in a spiritual way now, they may well have had in mind the qualifications of a king spoken by God to His people in Deut. 17:14-15. David met these requirements. He was indeed one of themselves; he was chosen of God; and he had proved himself to be a true shepherd of the people. He was a man who could be trusted. We could think of the qualifications also in terms of relationship to the people; leadership which had been proved; and the Word of God that had been spoken

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about the matter. All these qualities had been there for quite some time but had not been recognised by the people, perhaps partly because of their being blinded by the influence of Saul and partly because David's qualities had been somewhat concealed by his own actions and reactions. Of course, what we must also see is that this picture points forward to David's greater Son, our Lord Jesus, who became one of us, was God's anointed Servant, and who was indeed the Good Shepherd.

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5:6-10

We have just been told that David was thirty years old when he became king, then, for seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem, he ruled the people and the land. One of the first things David had to do was to take possession of Jerusalem from the Jebusites. Note that in spite of Israelites having been in the land for so long this city, which was to play such a significant part in God's purposes, was still in the hands of the godless. Such was the contempt of the Jebusites for God's king and his people that they jeered at them, saying that the blind and the lame were enough to guard the city. This is simply an example of the devaluation of spiritually minded men and their work which is still evident to this day. "Think of the ministers and laymen in the churches who take perverse pleasure in deriding and devaluing evangelicals, deliberately using the mocking and misused term "fundamentalists". David's men must have had knowledge of the water shaft, which the Jebusites must have thought was a secret, and used it to get inside the walled city. We must not read too much into v.8 regarding David's reference to the maimed and blind as being his enemies. After all we have seen and will see more of his kindness to a whole variety of people. Never allow the difficult verses to distract from the main message nor allow what seems unreasonable to undermine your attitude to the Scriptures. It may have been that the Jebusites, knowing David's reputation for mercy, deliberately used the blind and lame as defenders, thinking that David would not endanger people like them. This technique would correspond to using hostages as blackmail as we read of this kind of thing in the daily press. If this be so, then we see the deep and indeed diabolical nature of the attitude and opposition of the Jebusites. When dealing with the Devil there is no place for softness; but we need to stay close to God if we are to know when mercy gives way to judgment.

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5:11-16

These verses look unpromising but if we link v.10, 12 and 13 we will see important things. In v.10 we have a fact and an explanation. David kept on growing great, from victory to victory, and the reason was simply that the Lord was with him. In v.12 we are told that David perceived that God was with him, that God had established him, and that God had done this for him in terms of the good and the blessing of God's people. David recognised that a sacred trust had been given to him and he must have been aware that he could no longer live merely as an individual. He was God's man, God's servant, with God's work to do among and for God's people and for God's future purposes. This is a great responsibility and it is also the greatest privilege that can be given to any man or woman. Read of Paul's sense of privilege in Eph. 3:8 and his awareness of responsibility in Rom. 1:14-15. Now look at v.13. Does this not seem a total contradiction? He already had six wives (3:2-5) together with his first wife (3:13). Why did his thinking about his personal life take this direction at this time when it seemed he was living on a high spiritual level? We could say simply that it was a work of Satan, playing on David's complicated emotional personality and that would be true. But if we look at v.11 we see that David was becoming a man well known in the political and international scene. He was becoming famous, and that is always a danger in spiritual service. Of course, all the "big" men had impressive households of slaves and concubines and it seems David wanted to be seen to be on a par with them. How dangerous is carnal, worldly ambition! How easy it is to want to be "big" and to be "recognised". We must remember we follow Him who was willing to be despised and rejected of men.

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5:17-25

We noted the contrast between v.12 and 13 and we do well to consider the connection between v.13, which must have grieved God, and v.17 which tells of the attack of the enemy. No doubt the attack by the Philistines has to be seen as the inevitable opposition of the powers of evil against the work of God, but at the same time it

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is true to say that the wrongdoing of God's people, especially those called to lead, and to lead by example, gives opportunity to the Devil to launch an attack. Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 2:11 of how attitudes and actions can allow Satan to gain advantage over us, and Peter speaks of how giving way to natural but carnal passions (as David did in taking concubines) wages war against the soul. There is no place in Christian life for trifling with moral or spiritual laws. There are consequences and complications which follow and have to be lived with. Of course we must not fail to see that it was the increasing establishment of David's kingdom and power that aroused the Philistines to attack, and again there is a spiritual lesson here for all engaged in Christian service. Whenever there is spiritual advance; when there is a new spirit of resolution in individuals or congregations; when a new work shows signs that real foundations have been laid; and when the outreach of that work begins to invade territory long held by the powers of the world, the flesh and the Devil, then you can be sure the enemy will attack. Any Christian reading these notes who is at a stage of change or development of Christian life, when decisions affecting the future are being made, must be on guard. There is an enemy who is in fact apprehensive of what you may yet do to his kingdom if your spiritual progress is allowed to go forward unopposed. If that be so, then battles, even fierce and costly ones, must be seen to have a positive element of encouragement in them. Read 1 Pet. 4:12-14 and believe it, even if you do not feel anything of the spirit of glory!

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5:17-25

Go back before today's reading and sweep through the passage, noting v.10, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 25. We have the account of David growing greater, his widespread popularity, his spiritual complacency allowing moral laxity, the attack of the enemy, the hand of God and His guidance, and the victory God gave. We have to see the whole of David's life, including his wrongdoing which is not excused, held in the hand of God, guided by the counsel of God, and kept by the power of God. We must see and we must thrill to the constancy and tenacity of God who, having committed Himself to David, refused to give up on him. Later in life (2 Sam. 23:5) David saw this with great clarity, recognising how God had preserved and prospered him in and through all the changing scenes of life. We can look back, just as David could, and see how often the Lord's good providence has kept us from spoiling our lives and service, sometimes by frustrating us in ways we simply did not understand. Life's experiences can be very hard and costly but we must always remember that all God's dealings with us are in purest, sweetest and strongest love. The thing He cannot contemplate is giving us up, even when we are at our most perverse, rebellious and ungrateful. Read Hos. 11:7-9 and see the turmoil of our heavenly Father's heart. Read Heb. 12:3-11 and see how a Father's love will discipline in order that His children will be truly His and fully blessed. See in today's passage how David sought and was given clear, ongoing guidance and was led to glorious victory. There was so much going on. David was being prepared for his future service and being refined to be a man pleasing to God. The work of God was being advanced and the forces of evil were being brought to judgment. It is not always possible to see clearly the various strands of activity. We are too near the situation. But God sees, and He is active and sure in all He does.

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5:17-25

We have been given plenty to think about these past days and a very short note will suffice for a Sunday meditation. We have spoken of the tenacity of God's grace and love, holding David firm in spite of all. We must also note in v.22 that the enemy came yet again. He does not give up easily. Sometimes he comes in fierce attack (1 Pet. 5:8) but sometimes by quiet infiltration, sowing seeds of confusion and distraction in the midst of the work (Matt. 13:25). He can even come with such spiritual attractiveness that he seems an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Turn to Luke 4:13 and see how even Jesus was not immune. The Devil left until an opportune time, "for a season" (AV), "biding his time" (NEB), "until his next opportunity" (JBP). The Devil's last word is always, "I'll be back." But the real last word is always with God.

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6:1-5

David was now established as king, Jerusalem had been taken and made his capital city, and a new era of the work of God had begun. David seems to have been well aware that the victory was not his but God's and he

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seems to have been eager to bear testimony to this by bringing the Ark of God, the symbol of God's presence, right into the heart of the nation. This was a right and necessary response on David's part to the goodness of God, who had blessed and prospered him, and without whom he knew he could not face the future. But right things, however enthusiastically tackled, must be done in the right way, especially if God had given clear instructions as to how they should be done. Men were sent to Baalah of Judah (Kiriath Jearim) where the Ark had been deposited some twenty years previously (1 Sam.7:1-2). That there was genuine spiritual motivation in this is clear from 1 Chron.13:1-6 (Chronicles contains the spiritual commentary on the history recorded in Samuel and Kings). If the reference to all the men (all the people AV) (2) is to be taken literally, then the occasion was one of massive and enthusiastic celebration. There was a sense of occasion indicated by the reference to God enthroned between the cherubim, and there was a desire to do things in a worthy way. That is why they placed the Ark on a new cart, exactly as the godless, superstitious Philistines had done when they wanted rid of the Ark (1 Sam. 6:7-8). That is, the people of God adopted a pagan, Philistine expedient which, though it seemed worthy and impressive, was not according to what God had previously instructed, which can be read in Exodus 25:10-22. The whole point of the "poles" was so that no one should actually touch the Ark. David must have known, and should have known, what God instructed but he simply let his enthusiasm run away with him. God's work has to be done in God's way, which is the only worthy way. When the church begins to do spiritual work in a worldly way the result is confusion. Read 1 Cor. 1:17; 2 Cor. 10:3-4.

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6:6-11

The great and promising movement of spiritual revival and restoration came to a sudden stop, and we must note David's reaction of anger and fear. His eager enthusiasm for God became anger with God. After all, God had spoiled the procession, just when everything was going so well. What is more, as David would have protested, Uzzah was acting with the best of intentions, concerned only for the welfare of the Ark lest it fall off the cart and be damaged. But the Ark should never have been on a cart in the first place. And, if the Ark, and all the instructions and prohibitions of God's Law about it, signified the absolute holiness of God, then David and the other men as well as Uzzah had forgotten whom they were dealing with. Holy things, because they belong to God, must never be trifled with or presumed upon. No one wants the House of God, and His worship, to be deadened by stuffy, lifeless formality. But there is a reverence and reticence that are vital, not least as part of the witness to a godless world that has lost all sense of reverence for holy things. It is sad that even in churches claiming to be biblical and evangelical there can be a lack of true reverence. Scripture calls people to worship and bow down (Ps. 95:6), to be silent before the Lord (Zech. 2:13), not least to remember who God is. This is not a contradiction of enthusiasm. Worship without the enthusiasm of mind, heart and spirit is lifeless, but enthusiasm has to be taught and channelled by the instruction of God's Word. We do well to remind ourselves that the great evangelical ministry of Isaiah, that lasted some sixty years, had at its beginning and foundation a vision and awareness of the holiness of God (Isa. 6:1-5).

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6:6-11

It becomes clear that David's reaction was three-fold. David was first of all angry because God had disturbed his great scheme, bringing on it rebuke and judgment rather than blessing. David was then afraid: a strange reaction to the God who had done so much for him and brought him so far with such significant success. Of course, fear can be a healthy reaction if we have done wrong, provided it leads to a calm re-assessment of the situation, a recognition of the wrong so that it can be put right. But that was not the result of David's being afraid. In fact he took offence at God and sulked like a spoiled child who has been frustrated and denied his wishes. He seemed to say, "How can the Ark come to me if this is how God reacts to all I have done for Him?" So now David was not willing to take the Ark into the city. Instead he sent the Ark, the symbol of God's presence and blessing, to rest in the house of Obed-edom, a Philistine. How different it would have been if David had taken time simply to ask God where he had gone wrong and how he could put things right. But, of course, when we get carried away with enthusiasm about our own "schemes", we seldom pause to think even when things go wrong. We need to learn, and learn radically, that God is not there to act according to our whims or demands, nor will God be carried forward by our waves of enthusiasm. Sometimes enthusiasm is not

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the right reaction or motivation. After all, if the Ark of God had lain neglected for twenty years (some say much longer) a procession of solemn repentance and weeping might have been more appropriate than one of unthinking, uninstructed revivalist triumphalism. Do not fail to note the passing of three months (11) during which a pagan household knew the blessing of God's presence in a way that David and his people did not. When God deals with us and our activities in ways that cut across our expectations, we can either take offence, or we can humble ourselves under His mighty hand, and wait for His Word and guidance.

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6:12-15

David was learning some very important lessons about God, and about how God was willing and eager to bless even in places and among people who were far from being in accord with His holy will. God's blessings are not given according to human deserving or even human obedience. They are all of grace from beginning to end, and when David realised that even the household of Obed-edom was knowing God's blessing, presumably because of their reverent accepting of the Ark in their midst, he was prompted to realise that his former behaviour and reaction could and would be forgiven. He sent to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, and we must recognise the eagerness with which he did so and the pleasure it brought to him and his people. After all he had realised that God was willing to dwell among His people and bless them in spite of former wrongs. This is not to excuse the wrongs, but it assumes there had been true penitence. This time the Ark was carried in the way prescribed by God, but something was added. Perhaps the sacrifices were as much expressions of worship and reverence as they were a conscious recognition of sacrifice for sin, but there seems to have been a spirit of fear dominating David's thinking. It is almost as if he went on in dread lest he did something wrong. But this is fear, not faith, and it suggests a God who is waiting to judge and punish every failure and every divergence from truth. This kind of fear torments mind and heart (1 John 4:18; Rom. 8:15) and steals our peace. God is the One who is eager to bless, but David's earlier disaffection from God had clouded his thinking. It can happen to all of us. We need to remember that the full and final sacrifice for sin has been made once for all (Heb. 7:27) and it is on that basis, confessing our sin and finding forgiveness, that we come to God (1 John 1:9). We must not allow our sins and the remembrance of them to steal God's blessing from us.

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6:16-23

The spiritual enthusiasm which marked the return procession (15) seems to have reached a peak on arrival at Jerusalem and David's ecstasy was such that he was apparently so carried away that his behaviour fell short of what was seemly (16,20). To what extent David was undressed (20) we cannot say, and it may be that his wife was just criticising his behaviour as not being worthy of a king. Perhaps she was simply jealous of David's manifest popularity with the ordinary people. We, of course, must remember how necessary it is for our behaviour to be appropriate to both the place and time. What may be permissible in a social setting may not be so in a situation where worship and reverence for God are supposed to be the prime objective. Such things as music, dance and drama must be handled carefully in a Christian context, because it is so easy for such activities to become merely a vehicle for human, fleshly expression. When this is so the evil one is not slow to seize his opportunity. Human nature being what it is, when we are on a "high" with religious or spiritual enthusiasm we are always in danger of becoming unbalanced. In our story we must give David credit for his actions in v.17-19, setting the Ark in its place at the centre of the city and then, having ministered to God he also ministered to his people. It was only then that David returned to his own home, eager that his family should share in the gladness and blessing of the day. There is good reason to believe that, after the procession with its shouting, dancing and fervour, David was in a much more sober frame of mind and heart as he offered the sacrifices which, after all, were a reminder of sin, its judgment and its forgiveness. Perhaps we have here an opportunity to examine our forms of worship and our attitudes in dealing with holy things. Where do they lead us and in what frame of mind and heart do they leave us?

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6:16-23

We must still consider the facts about David's marriage and home-life revealed in this story. Michal obviously did not like her husband's religious commitment and spiritual fervour, because her words in v.20 were biting, calculated to hurt and to make David feel ashamed. Her jealousy was probably not so much in relation to the popular enthusiasm shown by the young women, which enthusiasm David no doubt enjoyed, but in relation to the fact that the Lord had obviously the first place in David's heart and life. She wanted him for herself. She wanted to possess him, and this is no basis for a friendship, let alone a marriage. There is no doubt David was an attractive man humanly speaking, and the anointing of the Lord and his being right with the Lord simply heightened that attractiveness. It is true of all of us that when we are right with God we are able to manifest the truest aspects of our personalities. It was clear to David that what his wife objected to and really despised was his spiritual commitment. He made plain that he was not prepared to compromise his commitment nor to deny his joy in the Lord, no matter if she or others were to despise him for it. He knew that others, whose hearts were towards the Lord, would honour him for his godly commitment. Michal did not prosper because of her attitude (23). She was the kind of woman who regarded all other kinds of enthusiasm as permissible but scorned enthusiasm for God. Perhaps that day David wondered why he had been so insistent on taking her back as his wife. How many Christians are there who know now that a relationship they have insisted on having has proved to be the very thing that qualified, quenched and stifled their spiritual service and joy. The proof of a God-given relationship is that it enables and encourages both parties to be their best for God.

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7:1-3

These few verses record David's desire to build a worthy house for God, a "special" place in which to set the Ark which symbolised God's presence among His people. This genuine spiritual desire stirred in David's heart at a time when God had given him rest from his enemies. This was not permanent rest and freedom from battle, as the next chapter will make plain, but a season of rest or quietness which the Lord gave, and still gives to His people from time to time. These spells of quietness are a gift of God's grace allowing the demands and pressures of spiritual warfare to be eased so that minds, hearts and spirits can recoup energy and be prepared for the next stage of service. God remembers and cares for our human nature and limitations (Ps. 103:14) and if *we* refuse to do so, pressing on relentlessly as if we were omnipotent, then we are both foolish and sinful. God gave David a time of rest, and while we recognise David's genuine spiritual motivation in his desire to build a house for God, we must also see it as a desire to "do something". Wisely, having learned from his earlier impetuosity, David spoke to his spiritual counsellor about his plans and he was no doubt reassured and encouraged by Nathan's response. It seemed to both men that this spiritual venture was a good one and, according to 1 King 8:18, no blame is to be attached to either man. Their intention was good and their motive was worthy. There seemed to be no cause for concern, and yet the following verses will make plain that their thoughts were not in accord with God's will. There may be a lesson here to the effect that times of quietness are not necessarily safer spiritually than times of battle and demand. Psalm 119:67 seems to suggest this and we must remember that later on, when David was again "at rest" or at least "unoccupied" in the comfort of his house, he was again drawn away from God's good and perfect will (11:1-5). There are many situations in which we need to take seriously Jesus' counsel to watch and pray (Matt.26:41).

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7:4-17

We must note from v.2 that David was thinking and reckoning on the basis of human or worldly values when he reckoned that God's tent should be upgraded to a cedar house. There is still to this day the tendency to think that big is better and more spiritual. Keep in mind how down through the history of the Jews they became so proud of and preoccupied with their temple (sometimes built with subsidy from secular powers), that they forgot the God of the Temple. Of course, whenever we become preoccupied with what *we* are doing for God, however sincere our motives, we have strayed from true spiritual service. It is wonderful and reassuring to see just how swiftly and decisively God corrected and countermanded the plan the king and the prophet had decided on. It is a testimony to the spiritual calibre of both men that first Nathan and then David (v.18ff) submitted to the Lord's word without hesitation. In v.4-7 God's message was that the plan that had come into

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their minds and hearts was something that had never even been hinted at by God down the generations since the time of the Exodus. In the "tent of meeting" (6), God had been with them and had signified his presence among them. This does not mean that in Christian worship and service we are to take the attitude that nothing must change. That would simply be the idolatry of tradition, which can be a devastating contradiction of the Gospel and dishonouring to God (Matt.15:1-9). But when God desires changes from well-trying and proved patterns He will make that plain at the right time, and this should make us cautious with regard to the "bright ideas" that "suddenly" come to our minds. David was very clear (or so he thought) about what he was going to do for God and for God's honour, but he had to be shown that he was wrong. How God did this we will consider tomorrow.

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7:14-17

Read carefully and count the number of times God says, "I", "I have" or "I will". The emphasis right through the passage is on what God had done for David in the past (9), what He was doing then in establishing him (10-11) and what He would yet do with, for and through David in years to come (12-17). There is realism with God and He reminded David that one day, when his work was fulfilled, he would die, but God does not die nor does God's work begin and end with any one man or any one place. God's plans are progressive, and the "house" He is building is not one of cedar or of any other material. It is built of living stones, down through the generations, and is the dwelling place for God by His Spirit (1 Pet. 2:4-10). God was saying to David that the work he was involved in was going to last far beyond his short life. What David had so much desired to do, namely to build a house for God's honour, was not going to be granted to him. His son after him would have that particular work to do. But this did not in any sense minimise or devalue the work David was doing. In days to come, as it had been in the past, there would operate the stern but gracious disciplines of God (14-15). If men prove faithless and disobedient, God will not hesitate to rebuke and chasten, because He is not prepared to allow His ongoing work to be hindered or spoiled. Think of how God's name and honour and integrity can be shadowed and soiled by the wrong lives of His servants (Rom. 2:24). At the same time God declares that the one thing He will not do is to withdraw His love from His people. He loves them, and us, in spite of everything. On the face of it, God was denying David the thing he most wanted to do, but in fact God was promising and preparing something far greater. Ponder Heb. 11:39-40 with its promise of something better. The hymn writer spoke well when he said. "Hast thou not seen how thy heart's wishes have been granted in what He ordaineth?"

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7:18-29

Here is David's immediate answer to God after Nathan the prophet spoke God's word to him. David sat before the Lord. There was nothing hasty: questioning why his prayer to build a house had been denied; and no suggestion that God had dealt unfairly with him. Here is a man of God at worship in the presence of his God, meditating on the person of his God and marvelling at the greatness, the glory and the goodness of his God. David was aware he had a God who should be "worshipped, trusted and adored" and he found himself "lost in wonder, love and praise". Remember this is the worship and prayer of a man who had just been told by God that his ideas of service were wrong and that his plans had been countermanded. But, of course, David had also been given a wider, deeper and more far-reaching view of God's will for him, and God's working in his life. He was staggered and expressed himself in v.18 saying, "Why, O Lord, such love me?" He was truly amazed to realise that what he had known and experienced of God thus far was almost nothing compared to what the future was to be (19). None of us really know the true spiritual dimension of what we are involved in and, in due time, from the standpoint of Heaven we shall look back in amazement to see how our puny lives and complicated personalities have been given a dignity and significance in the outworking of God's purposes for the history of the world. We will indeed, "Bless the hand that guided, and bless the heart that planned." In v.20-21 David seems to be saying, "Lord you know me through and through, and only the wonder of your amazing grace could have brought all this to pass." Having thus pondered God's heart of love and God's faithful promise he goes on to speak of his God, saying that there is no-one like Him. What we need to do now is to read or sing the hymn, "Holy, holy, holy . . . there is none beside Thee, perfect in power, in love, and purity."

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7:18-29

Have we become so accustomed to all our Gospel privileges that we have forgotten just what an honour has been done to us by God in making us His people, a people with present blessing and future glory? Do we ever ponder the fact that of His own free choice God committed Himself to us in everlasting promise and covenant and declared that He is not ashamed to be known as our God (Heb. 11:16)? Having spoken of this in v.23-24, David seems to move without a break of any kind into prayer (25-29), in which he simply says to God, "You have made known your will. Let it be so for me." The desires of David's heart have been brought into line with the good and perfect will of God and he finds both peace and joy. Indeed, he rests gladly in God's will. There is a wonderfully sweet yielding of David's heart and life in this prayer. He sees that God's love is sure; His words are true; and His blessing is the richest thing that any life can have. Two Daily Notes on such a passage have scarcely scratched the surface of the wealth of truth it contains. Perhaps again we need the help of the hymn-writers.

"Father, I know that all my life
Is portioned out for me;
And the changes that are sure to come
I do not fear to see;
But I ask Thee for a present mind
Intent on pleasing Thee.

"I would not have the restless will
That hurries to and fro,
Seeking for some great thing to do,
Or secret thing to know;
I would be treated as a child
And guided where I go."
(Waring)

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8:1-18

We have in this chapter a summary of David's battles whereby his kingdom was established. It is clear that the sequence of events does not follow on in strict time after chapter 7. The towering spirituality of the previous chapter gives place to a very down to earth account of the costly battles and struggles by which the kingdom was established. No doubt there would have been many in David's time, as there are now, who rejoiced and were blessed in an established, secure and spiritually rich work, who had no idea at all of the long hard-fought process whereby such a work was started and firmly grounded. One thing this chapter teaches is that every step and stage has to be fought for. People and powers antagonistic to God have to be faced, fought and overcome. Yes, it is God's victory and He alone has the right to glory (6, 14). But David and his loyal men did the fighting whereby the threat to the life, work and blessing of the nation was subdued. On a human level, many in the younger age groups in our nation need to be reminded that but for the costly service and sacrifice in past wars we would not now have the human and spiritual liberty we have. On a spiritual level, many in the younger age groups need to be reminded that but for the costly dedication of what were often small groups of people who made the Prayer Meeting their priority, and who gave their first loyalty in Christian service to their own congregation, they would not have the spiritual basis nor the spiritual ministry and opportunity they now have and enjoy. But who is willing to give that kind of practical, spiritual commitment to ensure that the life and witness of biblical, evangelical congregations will go on into the future in the power of God? Who is willing and ready to fight the battles of the Lord? As we leave this chapter, do not fail to note in v.9-10 that even pagan nations were glad of and blessed by the spiritual conquests of David. A church that is right with God is a blessing to a nation and to the world.

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9:1-13

The previous chapter told of David the warrior king fighting the enemies of God's people and work. Towards the end of that chapter we were told how David administered justice and equity to all his people (8:15), not just to a favoured few. This sense of righteousness is one of the graces forged in men and women who walk and work with God. Today's chapter shows that those who have been through the fires of spiritual battle, those with a radical commitment to God and to His work, are the people who are able to show a wonderful tenderness to others and who remember with gratitude those who have been good to them in the past. David never forgot the love, loyalty and support of his good friend Jonathan who had ministered to him when he was in great need (1 Sam. 23:16-18) regardless of danger to himself. Now, having received so much kindness from God, David wanted to show and to share that kindness with others. Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan, was welcomed, provided for, and given a privileged place at the king's table, all for the sake of his father Jonathan. There was gratitude in David's heart, but there was also awe and solemnity because he asked if any of Saul's house remained. Now, when you think of how great, grim and ruthless the house of Saul had been, it is quite amazing that that whole structure of evil had been swept away so totally. Read Psalm 37 that speaks so much about the collapse of evil men and their schemes, and note especially verses 35-36. We must be realistic about evil and about its judgment but, as David's attitude shows here, this should not make us hard of heart. David, who had known so much about fear, was quick to reassure the demoralised frightened son of Jonathan. Mephibosheth's words mean simply, "I do not deserve this kind of care," but love does not operate on the basis of deserving. If it did, none of us would receive God's love. But, if He loved us, we ought to love one another (1 John 4:11; Eph. 4:30-32).

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10:1-19

It is best to read the whole of a chapter such as this in order to see something of the ongoing experience of David whose work was now established. As early as 2 Sam. 5:11-12 we find a pagan king, Hiram of Tyre, impressed by David and desirous of maintaining friendly relations. No doubt he had his own interests at heart but he was friendly. At the start of today's story we find David, who had been so resolute in his days of necessary warfare, now showing that he was also a man of peace, ready to continue good relations with the son of Nahash. As far as it rested with David he would do his best to live at peace with others (Rom. 12:18). Hanun, influenced no doubt by his younger counsellors rather than his father's advisers, was swayed in his judgment and David's messengers were treated with total and public contempt, humiliated in a way that was calculated to make plain to David that he was not wanted. Hanun's princes slandered David's motives and it seems clear they were the kind of people who wanted confrontation. There are still those in our own day who are happy only when they are causing conflict. Perhaps they felt the king's friendship with David would in due time reduce their own influence at court, and there are always those, including some Christians, whose main motivation is to preserve and if possible to increase their own "kingdom". Ambition can be a dread disease and a lust for place and power can so easily become devilish and unprincipled. It is a relief to turn our attention to David who sent his personal servants to meet the dishonoured messengers. They were in effect met by the king in person, cared for by the king, and reassured with regard to their future place and service in the king's army (5). All who have been dealt with badly and humiliated by the enemies of God's work should take comfort from what we are learning here.

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10:1-19

It is clear from v.6 that it was not long before the Ammonites realised that their brash actions had landed them in trouble. From what they knew of David, of Israel, and of Israel's God, they knew they had problems. But, far from regretting their actions and certainly not repenting of them, they set about defending their wrong attitude. They had no difficulty in finding and hiring others who would be willing to fight against David. They had to be resisted. Evil must be resisted when it is determined to fight and to destroy. This has been learned in history. The question is not whether or not it is a just war, but whether or not it is a necessary and an inescapable war. The chapter records how the confederation of evil armies was defeated and we are told of the faith and courage of Joab (11-12). He called the soldiers to partnership in battle; he declared the true nature of the battle to be for

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the people and work of God; and he rested his cause in God Himself. The victory was won but that did not settle the issue. Evil does not give up easily and there was a further coming together of evil armies against Israel. We must not assume that these various kings and their armies had respect for each other, let alone love for each other. The one thing they had in common was that they were against God, His people and His work. At the end of the chapter we find the defeated Syrians making peace with David and being subject to him. But more, the Syrians decided to help the Ammonites no more. They had been inveigled into a situation of fighting against God and that has no future at all. We have been faced in this story with the reality of evil standing against the work of God and persisting in its attitude. This could alarm and unsettle us but, as we face the fact of the secret power of lawlessness "the mystery of iniquity AV" operating in the world, we must also grasp the fact that evil is not only supervised, its downfall is inevitable. Read Psalm 2:1-6, 10-12; 2 Thess. 2:7,8; Rev. 17:13,14,17.

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11:1-5

All who have followed the story of David, the man of God, must wish that this incident had never happened. We may not be able to answer the question, "Why did he do it?" but we can discover how it came about and learn important lessons for Christian life and service. We must recognise the weakness and vulnerability of human nature and see that a casual glance and a quick surge of feeling can sweep away all sensible thought and all spiritual concern and conviction. Before considering the facts let us take hold of Scripture in its wise counsel. "Satan has desired to have you . . ." (Luke 22:31). He always does, and Jesus' words were spoken to a man who was very sure of his spiritual standing and stability. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Matt.26:41). "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor.10:12). "There has no temptation taken you but what is common to all and God who is faithful will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able to bear but will, with the temptation, provide the way of escape" (1 Cor. 10:13). The way of escape can often be the way of spiritual duty. If David had been with his army, leading them in battle, he would never have faced this temptation. We focus attention on David because he was God's frontline man, but we must not forget Bathsheba. It does seem that she lacked womanly modesty if her bathing was so easily seen, and we must recognise that modesty and seamliness in dress and behaviour are things that should mark all men and women who claim to be Christian. It is not enough to talk about liberty and fashion and what is acceptable to society. If we cause a brother or sister to be assailed with temptation, let alone lead one into sin, then we have Jesus' stern words to cope with (Matt. 18:6). Some have suggested that Bathsheba set out to entice David, perhaps just to flirt, or to make a conquest. But that is always dangerous because the developments can get out of control.

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11:1-5

Keep in mind that David was not a spiritual novice but a man of long experience who had proved the grace of God in a variety of different circumstances. His experiences had made him aware of his dependence on God and of all he owed to Him. We have seen David's errors and failures as well as his triumphs, and it is amazing that in 1 Kings 15:5 the testimony to David is quite glowing except for this one matter, spoken of in relation to Uriah rather than Bathsheba. We have to see that we are dealing not with one moral collapse due to a sudden burst of passion, but with deliberate and calculated sin which he not only tried to cover up but which he refused to admit over a long spell of time. It is suggested that the context of the story is seen if we link chapters 10:1-5; 11:1-2; and 12:26. It seems right to emphasise that David, in remaining at Jerusalem, was in fact absent from his place of duty and his spiritual responsibility. Later, in v.11, Uriah seems bold enough to suggest this to David when he said "Shall I then go to my house?" Remember too that David already had more than one wife and his taking of Bathsheba, whom he knew to be married, seems to indicate that the emotional and sexual part of his personality had never been disciplined. It seems his moral integrity had been gradually undermined over a spell of years and if that be so then the apparently sudden temptation and collapse were not sudden at all, but altogether to be expected. No one can take liberties in the realm of moral behaviour. There was no attempt on David's part to resist the temptation. The king gave orders and no doubt the woman simply obeyed. But she made no protest, although she could have pleaded the prohibition of the law in Lev.18:19. When the deed was

done, and it was lust not love, both the man and the woman went on as if nothing undue had happened. But there were consequences. Their sin found them out.

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11:6-13

What is frightening here is the cold, calculating actions of David to cover up his sin. He seems to have had no concern for Bathsheba whose husband would be bound to find out, and perhaps be shattered by his wife's unfaithfulness. He had no thought for Uriah, whose loyalty in the king's army he had rewarded by stealing his wife. David's affability and his generosity in the gift of provisions made no impression on the soldier who slept with the servants in the open just as if he was on army duty. There definitely seems to be rebuke and even contempt for the king in Uriah's words (11). But still there was no response from David, only a continued deceit in an attempt to extricate himself from the miserable situation his own sin had landed him in. There seems to be no trace of shame in David, as he deliberately plied Uriah with drink in an attempt to get him to go against his own conscience and principles and to spend the night with his wife. David was sinking very low and this is what sin does. At this stage Uriah's integrity had no effect on David. There was no stirring of his conscience, no awareness of God, and certainly no suggestion of making a clean breast of it to Uriah and of seeking his forgiveness and God's forgiveness. Can a man of faith be so totally insensitive to God that the only consideration is to hide his sin and to get free from the consequences? The answer is yes! David did it and others have done it since. Yes, Christians can live double lives, seeking to have their besetting sins, which they often excuse or even justify, and at the same time go on in God's service, sometimes even basking in Christian popularity. But God holds His peace only for a season.

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11:14-25

Joab, the commander of the army, was David's nephew and he carried out the king's instructions without a word of protest or a moment of hesitation. He could easily have thwarted David's plan, claiming to have done as he was requested, and then say that "by chance" Uriah had escaped. The fact that he carried out David's instructions indicates that he was aware in some measure of the intrigue that was going on and he was therefore party to the murder. It is the callous, determined way David plotted that marks out the whole thing as a work of the Devil. Perhaps Joab was aware that, having this knowledge about David's evil deed, he would be in the position later to put pressure on David with threats to blackmail him. When people set out to deceive they do indeed weave a very tangled web from which they find it difficult to escape. It is hard to accept that a man such as David could dismiss this evil deed as casually as he does in v.25. He is really saying, "It is all past. Now, just forget about it." In one sense it was a terrible fear of discovery and what that would do to his name and reputation as king that drove David on. But in another sense it was the fact that he was infatuated by a beautiful woman that blinded him to every other consideration. David makes no mention of God at all in the whole developing process, almost as if he was assuming either that God did not know or that he would regard David as a special case because of his high position in the spiritual leadership of God's people. But, considering the generosity of God toward David, and all the blessings he had received, there was no excuse at all for David's actions and even less excuse for his attitudes. He seemed casual about the whole episode.

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11:26-27

It seems that Bathsheba was as relieved as David when Uriah was dead and she dutifully observed the convention of mourning, possibly for only one week, and then became David's wife. We are not told the reaction of David's other wives, nor of his household, nor of the general public, but we can imagine. David also observed the official mourning and then fetched to the palace the beautiful woman whom he had coveted from the start. Did David ever wonder if this woman who so easily was unfaithful to her husband would possibly do the same to him? The months went past and in due time the child was born. The situation had been regularised by some official form of marriage but the thing David had done displeased the Lord. God was angry, but David did not seem to be aware of it. There was yet to be a day of reckoning before there could be restitution to fellowship with God and service for God. Could it be at first that David was so enamoured of his new partner

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that he simply had no awareness that he had lost the fellowship he had once enjoyed with God? Think well about this, because sin has a price. A year was to elapse before the story in the next chapter came to pass. A child was born, but not into a happy home. For a whole year, month after month, God's hand was heavy on David and the Spirit of God convicted him increasingly of his sin, but David did not repent. Read Ps. 32:1-4; 38: 1-11, 17-18, 21-22 and feel the agony of this sinning saint as he suffered in body, mind and spirit as the direct result of his sin and his impenitence. It is the picture of a spiritual man of long years of service slowly shrivelling up and breaking down. People must have been aware of it, even if they did not know the exact cause. It is a terrible story and it should influence us in two ways. It should make us bring our relationships and our behaviour into the light of God for safety and sanctity. It should also make us run to Jesus with the prayer from an old children's hymn, "Cleanse me and save me.....from all that grieveth Thee."

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12:1-7a

If we are to understand the story we must look down to v.26-31 which tell of the continuing war against the Ammonites at Rabbah (11:1, 22-24). It seems that David continued his public work as king all through the year during which his troubled spirit was wearing him down, and when Rabbah was finally taken David was at the forefront of the celebrations. But the time of crisis had come and God sent Nathan the prophet to speak to the king, and he did so in a wise and wonderful way. A direct rebuke and accusation might well have resulted in resentment on David's part but there was still enough of the righteous king in him in spite of his cruel, selfish sinning to see the injustice and the need for judgment in Nathan's story. The king's reaction of anger was instant and yet he had no awareness that the application of the story was to himself. Right to the point of Nathan's words in v.7a "You are the man!" David was insensitive and unconvicted. After all, the work of God was going ahead and in spite of his personal "groaning" expressed in Psalms 32 and 38 David may have been reassuring himself and easing his conscience by saying that the work had not been harmed. It was only when Nathan pointed and said, "You are the man!" that David found himself personally confronted by God. He was convicted of his sin and his own lips had declared that judgment and restitution were the penalty (5-6). Up to this point David had been able to see the sins of others and to recognise that God's anger and judgment were called for, but he could not really see his own sins nor how far he was adrift from God. And yet, in one sense, Nathan's direct accusation must have been a relief to David, because now everything was out in the open and could be dealt with.

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12:7b-12

To make the story practical we should ask ourselves how long anyone can live a double life with God and get off with it. No-one "gets off with it" and it is only a matter of time before God confronts exposes and deals with the person. In David's case God waited over a year, and it is God alone who sets the timetable. If we look back to the story of Abraham in Gen. 16:16-17:1, it seems that thirteen years went past before that man's life was restored to spiritual fruitfulness. The process of David's restoration began with very plain speaking. In the name of God, the prophet accused David of gross ingratitude in view of all God's goodness to him on every level of his life. Then he was accused of despising the word of the Lord, that is, despising the person of the God who spoke to him such words of grace and goodness. Then he was accused of the cruel murder of Uriah and finally accused of the sin of adultery. Sin is far more complicated and complicating than just individual acts. One thing leads to another and more and more people are involved. David was told in no uncertain terms just how far reaching the consequences of his sinning would be. Three levels are spoken of. The sword would never depart from David's house, and there would be battles right to the end (10). Some commentators link 2 Sam. 11:3 with 2 Sam. 23:34 and suggest that Bathsheba was the granddaughter of Ahithophel who in 2 Sam. 17:1 sided with Absalom against David. This links with the second level of God's judgment expressed here in v.11. The third level of judgment is declared in v.12 which speaks of the exposure of David's secret sins to shame him. Even after repentance and forgiveness there can still be consequences to be lived with. This last thought could bring a terrible sense of dread to all of us who have sinned, but we must not allow the Devil to torment us about sins long since forgiven and forgotten. This was a special case of a man who was uniquely significant in God's purposes in the world. Public figures need to walk in the light with God so that there is nothing to hide.

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12:13-14

We must not think that David's words here were spoken easily. If we want to see the depth of meaning in them we must read Psalm 51, the words of a man with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. We must imagine David saying, "It is all true. I have deserved all I have gone through. God has every right to cast me off. I am no longer worthy to be God's man." All of that was true and a whole year of agony, remorse, misery and shame welled up within him. He may even have said, "I might as well be dead." But it was not going to be as easy as that. Still, we must not fail to see, to rejoice in and to marvel at the glorious gospel assurance spoken by the prophet immediately after David had groaned, "I have sinned." Here is the glorious Gospel: "The Lord has put away your sin." Read again the sob of glad relief in Ps. 32:1 "Oh the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven!" The New Testament expresses the same glorious truth in Rom. 8:1 "There is therefore *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Little wonder the old gospel hymn spoke of "the burden of my heart rolled away." What a God! There is none like Him, for He pardons iniquity (Mic. 7:18), He forgives, heals, redeems and crowns with mercy (Ps.103:1-5). He is the only one who can take us from the fearful pit of our sins and their consequences, and set our feet on the rock of stability (Ps.40:2). But David was reminded that his sins had scorned the Lord by giving the enemies of the Lord opportunity to deride His name (v.14). God's reputation had suffered and it would take time before this terrible, shameful incident was forgotten. But the consequences were to be poignant in a very personal way. The child conceived that evil day would die. Oh the regrets! Is sin ever worth it?

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12:15-23

Keep in mind that for a whole year David had lived with unconfessed sin draining his spiritual and physical vitality before Nathan spoke the words of conviction and then pardon (7, 13). David needed that instant assurance and without it he might well have crumpled and disintegrated. He had also heard Nathan's words telling him of what God had said about the child. In spite of this, when the child fell ill and lingered for some time we find David praying in deep anguish for the life of his son to be spared. It may have been that he was too worn out emotionally and spiritually to be able to think rationally. Perhaps David was feeling guilty that a mere child should lose his life because of his father's wrong dealing with God. David could well have been feeling deeply for Bathsheba who, like any other mother, would be distressed to see the life of her child ebbing away. The time of waiting must have borne in on David the sore truth that our sins bring grievous hurt and sadness to others as well as ourselves. Perhaps the truth is that David, refusing all offers of help or comfort, felt the need to be alone in the presence of God, with his thoughts and prayers, seeking to reach a new surrender and dedication to the God whom he had grieved and whose service had been hindered. When the child died David was aware that the crisis was over, even though no-one was brave enough to tell him. God had spoken and now God had acted. The uncertainty was over and the way ahead was ready and open. Beginning in v.20 we see the reappearance of David's faith and a new dignity of bearing. There was no resentment towards God but rather a spirit of worship, in which he yielded in willing submission to the God to whom he truly belonged. At long last David was at rest. No one can say what was in David's mind and heart when he spoke the words in v.22-23. At times it is best not to intrude into feelings that are intensely personal and private.

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12:24-31

We have already commented on v.26-31 and need consider only v.24-25. One of the lessons is that God, in His grace, is shown to be far greater than even our deepest sins and failures. Our previous studies have made plain that God does not shut His eyes to our wrongdoing, and that there is a price to be paid for wilful indulgence. But now we see that God turned the whole situation, including the relationship which had begun so darkly, to be a part of His ongoing purpose of blessing for His people and His work. We must see, of course, that David, now right with God, was the kind of man who is able to give loving comfort to his wife. It is when we are truly spiritual that we are able to be truly human. One of the sad things in Christian life is to meet people whose theology is meticulously biblical but whose persons are cold and lacking that attractive warmth of personality

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that marked our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace without truth can be sentimentality, but truth without grace can be inhuman. Now, let us marvel at the God of grace. The same God who sent Nathan to speak the words of rebuke, exposure and discipline sent him to declare to David that His love was set on this new child. The name Jedidiah means "Beloved of the Lord". When we remember that under the reign of Solomon the kingdom grew to great heights of glory, we can only marvel that the grace of God can work wonderful results in, through and by over-ruling the sins of His people. The intertwining of mercy and judgment is marvellous to behold and should cause us to worship. God is never party to sin nor does He ever condone it (Jas.1:13). God is never inhibited or frustrated by evil, for He uses it to fulfil His will. Judas was a key factor in events leading to the Cross. Rahab the prostitute is found in the genealogical table of the birth of Jesus In the next verse, without any cover-up, there is reference to David being the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah (Matt. 1:5-6). Is there not a hymn that begins, "Sovereign grace o'er sin abounding"? Romans 5:20 says the same.

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13:1-6

We have emphasised the glorious forgiving, over-ruling grace of God in David's life but we still have to read of the terrible complications which emerged in his family. If we look back to 12:27-30 we see Joab, David's nephew, either issuing a challenge to David's leadership or being very magnanimous and giving David credit for capturing Rabbah even though Joab had done the fighting. As the story goes on we will find that David was never quite sure to what extent he could trust Joab. Later, when David was dying, Joab supported the claim of Adonijah to the throne when David had made clear that the next king was to be Solomon (1 Kings 1:5-7). But there were more immediate complications, and they arose from David's many marriages. The story concerns lust not love, and has to do with the greedy demand for sensual gratification. It is a nasty story in the evil deed itself and in the scheming manipulation that made it possible. In one sense we should not be surprised at this happening in David's family, because it is simply a case of David's own carnal indulgence (think of his many wives and his adultery with Bathsheba) re-appearing in his children. The family could not have been ignorant of their father's many liaisons, and such behaviour not only creates an atmosphere in a family home, it exercises an influence. The Devil will see to that. Of course, Amnon went further in his debased sensuality than David had done, for Tamar was his half-sister. But we are on dangerous ground when we say one sin is worse than another in the realm of sexual morality. The terrible thing here is that it was all so calculated. But we must not be surprised. Human nature is fallen, corrupt, and ruthless and but for the restraining grace of God none of us knows what we might have done. Many can look back and see that God, in His mercy retrieved them from the brink of evil.

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13:7-14

How the Devil uses evil people to incite and encourage others to do wrong! In yesterday's passage it was cousin Jonadab who stirred Amnon's vanity as the king's son and who suggested the appeal to David. Was he just a troublemaker or had he some grudge against the king? He seems to have known exactly what Amnon wanted and that David was so weakly indulgent of his children that he would not suspect anything wrong. Beautiful Tamar, an innocent virgin, was sent by her father to Amnon's house. David seemed unaware of the strong feelings that were stirring. There is a possibility that Tamar may have been aware that Amnon had been "eyeing" her and she may even have been attracted to him. This is suggested in v.13 where she seems willing to marry the man, such a marriage being apparently accepted in spite of the prohibition of Lev.18:11; Deut. 27:22. But, of course, Amnon was not interested in marriage. His thoughts and desires were immediate and he knew exactly what he was after. Note how he manipulated both the situation and Tamar's gentle feelings so that he could be with her alone with the doors shut. The girl never meant to do anything wrong, but her protests were ineffective after she had been trapped. There are so many lessons here, especially for younger people in our own day when shared flats, mixed Halls of Residence and the like abound. Opportunities to be alone when "in love" are attractive and it is not enough for the young to say to parents and others, "Do you not trust us?" It is the Devil we do not trust and, besides, people get to know each other best and relations develop most healthily in company rather than in isolation. Many people who never meant to do wrong have found that temptation and opportunity coming together create a dangerous situation.

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13:15-22

There is a world of difference between love and lust and Amnon's actions right through the incident make plain that his attitude and his deep feelings of longing could best be described in the words, "I love me, and I want you." It was animal instinct and no more. When his lust was satisfied he had nothing but contempt for Tamar and wanted rid of her as soon as possible. The girl's feelings were of no interest to him. Her shocked pleading met no response at all. He had no interest in a relationship that was permanent and which would call for care and loyalty as well as for love, which last word he knew very little about. Tamar was cast out and shut out, left with her hurt and shame, both of which would be public knowledge with the torn robe and the ashes on her head. Whatever innocent stirring of feeling she may have had for Amnon she knew now that she had simply been made use of and she was devastated. Of course, deep hurt and long-term scars can result from trifling with feelings of love, even if things do not reach the kind of carnal stage this story reveals. But when there is love that is true neither party will behave in any way that would hurt or shame the other. And it falls to the man to be manly and to set the standard that is worthy of the loved one and worthy of God. Absalom (20) seemed to know at once who the culprit was. Amnon seems to have had a reputation! It is difficult to know what Absalom's words to his sister meant or how they could be a comfort. Perhaps he was saying to keep it in the family for the sake of their name. But he did take her home to care for her. We are told that David was very angry, but he did nothing to execute justice. Perhaps he feared that Amnon would simply say, "Father, you did the same kind of thing." In Absalom's case we are told of cold calculating anger and hatred. He nursed his wrath to keep it warm! There would be trouble.

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13:23-36

For two full years Absalom waited his opportunity and the fact that he concealed his hatred is significant. He hated Amnon and no doubt he was angry with his father David, perhaps even despising him, because no action had been taken by him to punish Amnon. Was David the kind of father who refused to see wrong in his sons, especially Amnon, his first born? There must have been an atmosphere of tension within the family at first, but as the months went past perhaps everyone felt the misdeed was in the past and was best forgotten. But Absalom was determined that Amnon would suffer for his evil deed. It was vengeance more than justice that was in Absalom's heart. But we must never forget that vengeance belongs to God alone, and He is the One who settles accounts (Rom.12:19; Deut.32:35). When the time came for the celebration associated with the sheep-shearing, Absalom's plans began to take shape. David was suspicious of the invitation, no doubt seeing the possible danger if all his sons were together. There is no suggestion of a happy family here! But when Absalom pressed him, David, no doubt against his better judgment, consented. We begin to see the weakness in David's character that may well have emerged as a direct result of the Bathsheba incident. Suspicious as he was, David failed to challenge Absalom just as he had failed to challenge Amnon. One thing was leading to another. The picture in v.28-29 is vivid, and we must not miss the part played by strong drink. We must also remember that it takes very little strong drink to make frail mortals dull in mind and weak in moral resolve. Note last of all how the various sections of David's family seem to have become self-contained units with a loyalty to their own section but with neither loyalty to nor respect for the others.

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13:23-36

We return to the passage to see just what a mess David's family situation had got into. The family party had disintegrated rather than dispersed (29) and very swiftly rumours reached David to the effect that all his sons had been killed. It is clear from v.31 that David regarded this as a real possibility and he may well at that point have wished he had done something about it sooner. Procrastination can be a deadly thing. But so can precipitate action. Jonadab comes on the scene again (3, 32-33) and "explains" to David what had happened and why, making no mention of course of his own diabolical part in arranging the original rape. David, as king, could well have demanded why Jonadab had not passed on this information sooner. He could have been charged with serious crime in relation to endangering the peace of the kingdom and causing the death of the

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firstborn son who could have been regarded as heir to the throne. But David seems to have lost his decisiveness. This too may have been the result of his liaison with Bathsheba. What a stream of consequences flowed from that fatal afternoon! There is something patronising about Jonadab's words in v.33. It is difficult to think of the weeping and wailing in v.36 as genuine sorrow, either for the death of Amnon or for the obvious absence of Absalom. Perhaps all of them were wondering just what would happen next, for no-one seemed to trust the other. David may well have been miserable in remembering how he had plotted and accomplished the death of Uriah. On the other hand he may have just become really aware of the outworking of the pronouncement by Nathan that the sword would never depart from his house (12:10-11). David wondered just where all the confusion would end and what would happen next. Little wonder he wept. His "affair" with Bathsheba was costing him and his family dearly.

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13:37-39

The complications of David's experience become very evident as he began to see that he had to live with the full-grown results of choices and decisions made earlier in his life. He had several wives from different backgrounds and they undoubtedly influenced his sons. There is no reason to believe that Absalom's mother from the royal family of Geshur was a believer in David's God, let alone a worshipper. David had married her when he was adrift from God (1 Sam. 27:1-3,7-8). It was natural that Absalom should escape to Geshur where he would be accepted and safe for his mother's sake. We can assume that Absalom took with him his armed men who had carried out the murder of Amnon. It would seem that Absalom was alienated not just from his father but from his father's commitment to God, choosing to go and live with a pagan people. Of course, we do not know what Absalom was thinking. With Amnon the firstborn son dead, Absalom may have had aspirations to the throne and as the story goes on this seems to emerge. But at this stage David seems to have had no such suspicions about his son, who seems to have been something of a favourite and he longed to have Absalom back. But here again we see David's indecisiveness. In one sense he was relieved that Amnon was dead but it must have been a grief that he had been murdered by his brother. There is no mention of poor Tamar, sinned against so grievously in the context of the family where she should have been safe. Perhaps David now wished he had acted in judgment when Amnon violated Tamar. He wanted Absalom back but if he was not dealt with for his crime of murder the king's reputation would be in danger. David's mind and heart were a mixture of anger and sorrow. Could he, an adulterer and murderer who had been forgiven by God, deny forgiveness to Absalom? Would Absalom be open to any approach by his father? What would the reaction of Amnon's family be? Where was it all going to lead? Where would the next family eruption happen? Poor David. His life would have been much simpler if he had not made so many important decisions when he was out of God's will. But do not forget, God says He loves the backslider still (Hos. 14:4 AV).

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14:1-3

As a father David must have grieved sorely over his sons because of the evil things they had done and yet a father's love is deeper than his sons' misdeeds. There was grief that Amnon had died at the hand of his brother and yet there was a feeling that justice had been done. There was grief that Absalom had fled from home and yet a feeling of anger that he had taken the law into his own hand. David's heart longed to go to Absalom but for three years he could not bring himself to do so (13:38-39). Perhaps he felt it was Absalom's place to make the first move. Aren't we glad that in the matter of forgiveness God did not wait for us to make the first move? Many of us would testify that "While I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me." In his own experience David had known the forgiveness of God in the matter of both adultery and murder, should he not now have been willing to show the same grace in dealing with his erring son? Is there not a lesson for all of us in our dealings with each other? Is it not true that in calculating blame and recalling hurts we inhibit the whole process of forgiveness and reconciliation? We may criticise David for his apparent unwillingness to forgive the son whom he loved so dearly (perhaps too dearly) but if we look on to 15:6 we see that Absalom stole the hearts of the people away from David their king. We have a situation here in which there was a clash of human emotions and spiritual responsibility, and David, weakened and indecisive because of his own past sins, is seen to be under pressure from both Joab and Absalom. Today's verses show a man taking it on himself to manipulate the

whole situation. What he had in mind as the main objective we cannot tell at this stage but his motive may have been political rather than spiritual.

14:4-24

Keep clearly in mind that the context of this story is the on-going work of God, which had as its ultimate climax the coming of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is the background against which the actions of men have to be evaluated. In like manner all our actions of faith or unbelief are set against the background of the work of God moving to its climax of the coming again in glory of that same Lord Jesus Christ. The work of God has far greater importance than our personal pleasure and fulfilment. Keep in mind also that David, Absalom and Joab each had murder on his conscience. Now, when there has been moral wrong it is inevitable that spiritual awareness and clarity are clouded. For three years David had allowed the situation to drag on. Joab, like many after him, felt he could handle things. He did not go directly to David to reason, plead and encourage. Perhaps he felt the king would not listen. But he could have tried. Perhaps he was more concerned to win Absalom's favour. There is no openness here. Joab may have had an eye to his own future position, trying to make sure that whoever ended up in power, David or Absalom, he would be in favour. How easy it is to let self-interest become the dominant factor in thought and action! The "story" Joab instructed the woman to tell is very similar to that told by Nathan to David (12:1-6), and David seems to have become suspicious or even alarmed in v.8, when he said he needed time to think what should be done. The woman pressed her case and when the king gave his verdict in favour of her son she was bold enough to say to him that he had not dealt in that way with his own son. She went as far as to say that David's refusal to restore Absalom was against the interests of the people of God. Her words were powerful, emotional and with spiritual thrust. She spoke of God who restores the banished outcast, and that must have made David think of how God had restored him after his great sin. Her praise of David, though fulsome, had a ring of truth, because he was God's man who could think spiritually and who knew God's blessing (17). The whole scheme was successful, as the next passage will show. One commentator makes this observation: "There was a world-wide difference between the purpose of the parable of Nathan and that of the wise woman of Tekoah. Nathan's parable was designed to rouse the king's conscience as against his feelings; the woman of Tekoah's, as prompted by Joab, to rouse his feelings as against his conscience." That is worth thinking about.

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14:4-24

In terms of human affection there is no doubt that David wanted Absalom back. But sometimes human care has to be denied in the interest of the safety of God's work. The woman's pleading was full of the kind forgiveness of God to those who have fallen, and we must never diminish God's wonderful grace. But Absalom was not a man who had fallen but one who had rebelled and that is a very different thing. Indeed it is dangerous to restore to the heart of the work and to a place of influence someone who has given no indication of a change of heart or spirit. But as soon as David was clear that Joab's influence was behind this whole approach he had to face the issue of what Joab would do if his plea was denied. Political manoeuvring is a minefield and it is sad to see David so much under the influence of men. He could not be sure but he may well have wondered if Joab had already been in negotiation with Absalom. Poor David! Because of his past sins and weaknesses, he found himself subject to emotional blackmail and he consented to the return of Absalom against his better judgment. It was a decision taken on political rather than spiritual grounds. But it was not a solution to the situation, for Absalom was allowed to be *in* Jerusalem but *not in* the presence of nor in fellowship with his father. We could criticise David for being unforgiving, but perhaps he knew his son better than any. We are best not to judge until the rest of the story becomes clear. We could spiritualise v. 24 and apply it to people who are in their places in church Sunday after Sunday but who are not in the presence of their Heavenly Father. We need to make sure that our relationship with God is kept clear, true, healthy and warm.

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14:25-33

Absalom was certainly an imposing and attractive personality, at least as far as appearances were concerned. He seems also to have been very aware of his appearance and popularity, and the hair-cutting seems to have been

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something of a public ceremony. But appearances can be deceptive and Absalom was not satisfied with his position which still indicated he was not allowed the privileges and rights of the king's son. He sent for Joab. He did not invite him; it was an order. He did not go to him; he was too "big" for that. And when Joab ignored the twice-given summons, Absalom reacted, and we begin to see something of the ruthlessness of the king's son. Now if Absalom was prepared to treat like this the man who had negotiated his return to Jerusalem, what might he do to the king who had refused to have him in his presence? Does it not begin to appear that it might have been better for David and for the work of the kingdom if Absalom had remained in exile? When David was approached by Joab and was no doubt told of Absalom's insistence and confidence, he gave way. The picture in v.33 is of Absalom bowing in apparent loving loyalty and submission to the king, and the king receiving him in loving welcome. But appearances (as we have said before) can be very deceptive. If we could have seen the faces of these three men, what would we have seen? Would there have been a smile of triumph on Absalom's face and a look of apprehension on the part of both Joab and David? David had more than one "Judas" to cope with! Never forget that there is an enemy who is set to harm God's work and people, and that enemy often comes in spiritual and attractive disguise (2 Cor.11:14).

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15:1-6

Having gained a position of influence, Absalom was not slow to make use of it. The story is of a deliberate and devilish piece of electioneering in which he gathered power to himself by the well-tryed method of promises and criticisms. He made sure he was in the right place to meet people. He told every man his case was just but pointed out that the king's carelessness and indifference had resulted in no-one being appointed to deal with just complaints. He ingratiated himself with the people, fed their discontent, encouraged criticism of David who, in spite of all his faults, was still God's appointed king, leader and shepherd. We can just imagine the tone of voice in which Absalom said, "Oh, if only I was king you would be well served" (4). The people seem to have forgotten

Absalom's murders and they idolised him. So, in a deliberate and sustained way, Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel, undermining their regard for their true leader, and making them forget all they owed to the man who had brought them through so much to the stability of the present and hope for the future. This is a story that is often repeated to this day in the context of God-blessed ministry. There are those who, for various reasons, make it their business to inspire criticism and discontent, to denigrate the work of their ministers and to deride their flaws and limitations which, of course, are open for all to see. Many a minister has been broken, not by the opposition of the godless, but by the cruelty of the "spiritual", whose strong personalities have gathered a "following" which has set up a church within a church. In our passage the people were taken in by Absalom. They may even have been impressed by the fierce way he dealt with Joab (14: 30-31). But they did not ask the questions, "What has Absalom achieved so far in his life? Is he the kind of man who can be trusted to lead?" They lost their hearts to Absalom, but they should have used their heads more effectively.

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15:7-12

Absalom's deliberate and careful policy of popularising himself went on for four years and it is difficult to imagine that David had no awareness of what was happening. There is no record of any of David's faithful counsellors advising him and, in the light of v.12, it seems that David's right hand man was involved in the treachery. That must have been a blow to David but at the same time it may have jolted him into awareness that he had not been taking the spiritual leadership he should have done. It may also have caused David to recall the warning of difficulty and judgment spoken by Nathan (12:11). David's past was beginning to overtake him and his being unaware of what was happening may have been part of God's rebuke, making him insensitive to spiritual issues. The king accepted without hesitation Absalom's sudden bout of spirituality (8) and so the plan proceeded, having been given a religious veneer. The whole thing was devilish and the same evil motivation has to be discerned in some people who, appearing to be very spiritual and earnest for God's truth, are in fact basically interested in making a "kingdom" for themselves. Many a Christian work, sometimes a long-standing work, has been assailed and broken down by men and women within it who have quite deliberately gathered

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people to themselves to be disloyal to the man God had set as leader. No doubt David, by his sins and failures, had given many people ground for criticising him and devaluing his leadership. But one of the very sad aspects of the deteriorating and dangerous situation was that two hundred men were drawn into the evil plan without being aware of it. They must have been shocked when they realised that they had been not only led away from David but had been led into fighting against God. We must be very careful whom we listen to and follow. There is warning in the New Testament to that effect (1 Cor. 4: 14-16; Phil. 3:17-18; Rom. 16:17-19). But always remember that the Devil is an expert at appearing angelic (2 Cor. 11:14)

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15:13-18

Before we criticise David for fleeing we need to remember v.12, which tells us that Absalom's "group", his supporters, had grown steadily, that David's counsellor was with them, and that the two hundred invited guests (11) would in all probability have been prominent, well-known men. All this would have given the rebellion an appearance of power. There is a suggestion in today's verses that David had been aware of what was going on and was in fact all ready to flee. It is even possible that David had sent the messenger to find out the situation and that his decision to go was a calculated one, not panic reaction. It is easy when not actually involved in a situation to pronounce on what should be done and to criticise others for their decisions or lack of them. There are many who are not in any sense involved in the on-going work of a congregation, especially in its leadership, who are quick to say what should be done. But they themselves have never actually had to face these kinds of decisions. Theology can sometimes be theoretical! David knew from past experience that there are times to stand and fight, and times to yield and apparently surrender the ground to the enemy. Many a war-time commander has won a campaign by losing a battle! David's heart must have been warmed, thrilled and encouraged by his servant's words in v.15. When a leader has men and women he can count on he can face amazing odds, but the loyal ones have to express their commitment. The ministry of encouragement must involve speech: it is not enough just to pray. David's servants obviously trusted his leadership. The king seemed to be aware of this and the picture in v.18 seems to be something of a ceremonial 'march past'. It may be that there was already a stirring in the heart of David and an awareness that he was still God's man with a future of service. His loyal friends believed that too.

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15:19-23

We begin to see here the regard many people had for David. Many of them had been with him a long time and knew his vices as well as his virtues, his failures as well as his successes. But, knowing themselves also to be far from perfect, they did not abandon him at this time of crisis. The tears of the whole country (23) expressed their feeling for David in the time of his humiliation. Perhaps they sorrowed also as they remembered the sins of their leader and the distresses of his family life. They may even have wept because they felt they had failed to support David and to pray for him in the earlier stages of his life. But perhaps the greatest testimony to the character and worth of David is seen in the words of Ittai, words that remind us of Ruth's similar words of loving commitment (Ruth 1:15-18). Ittai was a Philistine who had only recently joined David along with his six hundred men (v.18) and now we find him totally committed to David and his cause. What had drawn such a man to David? It could have stemmed from the time in 2 Sam. 6:10-11 when the Ark of God was among the Gittites, or it could have been the reputation and influence of David when he had been walking true to God. There is a drawing power in true spirituality as is seen in the Gospels in the stories of how people with all sorts of needs were drawn to Jesus. What we have to note in David is that, in spite of his own serious predicament and the obvious dangers and demands of the future, he expressed his genuine care for this man and his family (22). In spite of recognising that the presence of little children would slow down his travelling, when David heard Ittai's words of commitment he simply could not refuse him. Such commitment must have encouraged and challenged David in his own struggle back to spiritual usefulness.

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15:24-29

Look back to v.16 and the reference to David's concubines which reminds us of the carnal indulgence of his life. But think also of the providence of God which was separating David from at least some of the complicated relationships that had hindered his usefulness to God. Now look at David's instructions regarding the Ark of the Covenant which symbolised God's presence with His people. David could have kept the Ark so that he could point out to his enemies that God was with him but he did not do so. Jerusalem was the place for the Ark, the city that was set to be the significant centre of God's on-going purposes. David's words are full of realism that comes from faith. He did not regard himself as indispensable to God's work and God's people. If, because of his sins, he was to be 'a castaway', 'disqualified' or 'laid aside as of no further use' (1 Cor. 5:24-27), then the people who would carry on the work needed the assurance and encouragement of the Ark in their midst. If God was pleased to reinstate David to his spiritual leadership then He would bring him back to Jerusalem. Zadok and Abiathar were sent back to Jerusalem to minister to the people in the things of God. No doubt David, knowing he could trust these godly men, was also a wise army general and expected information from the priests regarding the on-going situation in Jerusalem. Acting in a spiritual way in willing submission to God does not in any sense require us to be less than wise and careful in the practicalities of life. David had to face the fact that Absalom's rebellion might yet prove successful and he would take the throne. If that were to be, then godly men such as Zadok would be needed at the heart of the nation. David's concern was not for personal survival but for the survival and progress of God's purposes. If that were always our chief concern our attitudes and actions would often be different.

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15:30-31

This is a tremendous picture of distress which has far more to do with genuine repentance than with remorse and self-pity. There is no indication that David was saying, 'Why should this happen to me?' because, after all, he knew full well why it was happening. He was not likely to forget the words of Nathan in 12: 13-14, words that spoke so clearly of both forgiveness and punishment. The forgiven king knew he was living with the consequences of his own wrong-doing and he was aware that it would have long-term results. It is interesting to note that chapters 13:1 and 15:1 both read in AV "It came to pass after this" Our wrong-doing may still affect us and others long after we have forgotten it. That should make us live carefully and deal wisely with God's work and His people. Here the people may have been sharing their king's distress without knowing or understanding fully what it was all about, and their distress would have been both a comfort and yet a burden to David, who would have been aware that he had brought this whole situation upon his nation. Something of David's deepest feelings may be seen, for example, in his prayer not to be cast away from God's presence and service, as recorded in Ps. 51:11-13. The news of Ahithophel having turned traitor was very possibly the occasion of the words in Ps. 41:9, words that remind us of the dark character Judas Iscariot. Our Lord obviously had the Psalm in mind (John 13:18,22) and in Matt. 26:21-25 we are told how all the disciples felt a bit guilty, all except Judas who showed no sense of shame at all. It must have been a terrible blow to David to realise that the man he had trusted had been for a long time conspiring against him. To deal deceitfully behind a man's back is a despicable sin, and many a servant of God has known the pain of this. David simply took it to the Lord in prayer, and left it there. God would deal with it. Paul took the same attitude in 2 Tim. 4:14-15.

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15:32-37

On the face of it, this passage tells simply of an accepted stratagem of war, the setting of spies in the enemies' camp, and no moral judgment is passed. But we can sense something more dramatic and perhaps more spiritually significant if we remember that from the top of the Mount of Olives David and his men would be able to stand and look over the city of Jerusalem. No doubt David would wonder if he would ever again take his place in the capital and, as he turned his back on the sight, that must have tugged at his heart. He would feel deeply that he faced a very uncertain, unknown future. Changes, whatever the reason for them, are never easy to cope with, especially when there is a sense of guilt, a feeling of failure and an awareness of weakness. We would like to think that David and his people did take time to worship there (32) because that is an opportunity to get God right back into the centre of both thought and feeling. David's thoughts were already turned towards

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God, as his brief, earnest prayer in v.31b indicates. What we have in v.32, with the arrival of Hushai, is God's answer to that prayer. Hushai was indeed a friend to David, feeling deeply for the king in his distress. We do not know why David said Hushai could be a burden if he stayed (it is suggested he was an old man) but he was not offended. When the suggestion was made that he should join other men loyal David in the city he never hesitated. That must have thrilled and encouraged David. It is always an encouragement when people are instantly willing to serve wherever, and soon as, an area of need is pointed out. Personal preference and convenience just do not come into the thinking of such men and women. To serve is their delight, and to have share in the work, even when secret or dangerous as it was for Hushai, is their privilege.

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16:1-4

As the story develops we become more and more aware that God is in it, working out His sovereign purposes. His methods are sure, even though they may be mysterious because of our limited and defective spiritual sight, and He sets His servants to be His instruments in the right places at the right times to do the right things. But the people God uses are not necessarily "saints" and at times they may be motivated by sheer self interest, as Ziba was here. On the face of it he was being generously loyal to David and, when so much was against him, David took the man's actions as a good and great commitment. But Ziba made it his business to slander his master and to portray Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, as a traitor with designs on the throne, as grandson of Saul. Without pausing to think (and how many of us do this again and again to the harm of God's work) David reacted, disowned the son of his loyal and loving friend Jonathan, and gave all his property to Ziba, which, of course, is what the deceitful man had wanted from the beginning. This kind of thing is still with us! People come to our side with great protestations of spiritual admiration and co-operation and later we find that what they really wanted was to use us to make a kingdom for themselves. If David had paused for a moment to think, he would have realised that Mephibosheth could not have joined his army on the march into unknown territory because he was lame. Read 2 Sam. 4:4; 9:1-10, then go on to 19:24-30 to see just how wrong David was in jumping to conclusions about Mephibosheth. Even when all was made plain, David acted meanly and we must admire the dignity of the man who had been wronged. When we think of Ziba we are reminded of Jesus' words of warning about the hypocrisy of religious men who, under the guise of spirituality, seek only their own advancement (Matt. 6:1-4; 23:1-7).

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16:5-14

This is a wonderful but painful story, which reveals just how deeply the grace of God was working in David's heart and how, in true penitence of spirit, he was learning to humble himself under God's mighty hand in the hope that some day God would raise him up again (1 Pet. 5:6). In yesterday's reading, without thinking, David reacted to what he felt was an act of treachery and disloyalty. But here, in face of public contempt and accusation, he is quite different. Shimei, representing the house of Saul, cursed David, that is, he pronounced God's rejection and judgment of David. Shimei's interpretation of David's situation was totally wrong, because it was God, not David, who had rejected and brought down Saul. But even wrong accusations can hurt and devastate when a man is under pressure and when everything seems to be going wrong. Without doubt this was an attack of Satan against God's vulnerable servant. The preposterous nature of the accusations was such that David's loyal servant was angry and wanted to take action. We must commend him for his prompt words, because if no-one had spoken up for David at that point he might have been sorely hurt even to the point of losing heart. Many a servant of God has been demoralised by the silence of friends when a word of love, loyalty, support and appreciation would have given fresh heart. We must not read harshness into David's words to Abishai (10) but we must see that David was saying to him clearly and without hesitation that this was not the way to deal with the situation. David recognised that there were many reasons why he was in this situation of costly flight and danger, but he also affirmed that he and his future were in the hand of God. This was not a time for resentment or reaction. It called for faith, trust and submission, and David looked to God, leaving the whole issue with Him. Whether God dealt with him in rebuke for his sins or in mercy that would restore, or a mingling of both, David rested his times in God's good hand (Ps. 31:14-15).

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16:5-14

This passage repays further study. Shimei, evil though he was, was a reminder to David of his past sins and wrongs, all of which had affected both him and the work entrusted to his leadership. That was, and always is, a painful providence but it can lead to wisdom and carefulness (Ps. 119:67,71). The story also reminds us of the way that Satan, the Accuser, seizes and continues to make use of the opportunities our sins give him. Note very carefully that even after David's wonderful testimony of submissive faith (11-12), the accusations of Shimei continued as the king's party made its way along the road. This was simply the tormenting of the Devil, seeking to distress David even if he could not be distracted from his trust in God. In such situations the only thing to do is to grasp by faith what the Bible teaches to the effect that the one who accuses us day and night has in fact been cast down (Rev. 12:10-11). We have to believe that it is God Himself who speaks the word of forgiveness to us and about us (2 Sam. 12:13; Zech. 3:1-5). God does not pretend that we have not sinned, nor must we ever pretend to ourselves about our sins. Neither must we think that a new surge of dedication to God and to His service compensates for past sins and failures. The price of sin was paid in the death of the Saviour and what we have to grasp, hold to and rest in is the clear declaration of Scripture that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). But it takes faith to hold to that when the Devil is accusing, when people are accusing, and when circumstances are so adverse that there is no clear indication as to what the future will be. This highlights the depth of David's faith when he submitted to God in a spirit free from bitterness, self-pity or presumption and really said, "It may be that God will bring good out of all this."

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16:15-23

Note the contrast in the two pictures. In v.14 David and his men were in some unknown, isolated place, uncertain about the future, but refreshing themselves. It should remind us of the still waters of rest in Ps. 23:2. Over against that we are shown Absalom in Jerusalem, seemingly in the ascendant, full of confidence. But we must not be deceived by appearances. God was with David, not with Absalom. It would be easy to criticise and even condemn Hushai for his fulsome words to and his deliberate deceiving of Absalom. Deceit once practised soon becomes habit and can reach the stage when a person loses all sense of truth and falsehood. There is another example of deliberate lying in the story of Rahab in Joshua 2:1-7. Is falsehood pleasing to God? Lying is not necessary to advance God's cause. It is easy to criticise Hushai but we need to remember what a difficult and dangerous task had been given to him by David (15:32-37). Remember too that the situation was one in which David, the rightful occupant of the throne by command of God, had been ousted by the military and political coup led by Absalom. Hushai was willing to put his life in danger in order to serve God's king. His words of flattery pleased Absalom and swept away his suspicions. The scene was being set for the downfall of Absalom but the usurper's pride and evil were yet to be exposed publicly and in such a way that when his judgment came it would be clear to all that it was both right and necessary. The counsel of Ahithophel (20-23), David's trusted friend who had deceived him and defected from him, shows how cleverly ruthless he was. This public act was a deliberate insult to and shaming of David; a specific and recognised claim to the throne; and an act calculated to make permanent the breach between Absalom and his father so that no future reconciliation would be possible.

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16:15-23

Did any of the people involved have any idea of how quickly the situation was developing? Evil men were quite sure *they* were directing events but there is no doubt that, as always, God was in control. God's work and God's people are always in God's hand and in His hand alone. It is not always clear what motives or objectives people have, but everything is always completely open to the eyes of God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13) and from whom no secrets are hid (Matt. 10:26). We must remember that in all the work of God we are involved in spiritual warfare, and that means we must watch out for the Devil who very often wears his most spiritual clothing. We must learn a very important lesson from v.23. Ahithophel was regarded by everyone as a spiritual man, a man who knew God and was trusted by God, a man whose spiritual advice, guidance and leadership could be trusted. But it was not so. If anyone had suggested even the slightest doubt about Ahithophel's doctrinal position, his spiritual understanding, or his personal character, people would have been

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horrified. They hung on every word Ahithophel said and would follow him anywhere and everywhere. But the man was not what he seemed to be and, without knowing it, he was leading the people in a way that was quite contrary to God. Ahithophel knew he could influence people and he had ambitions for power. His motivation was “self” but he seemed so very spiritual. It seems that no-one took time to ask where his advice was leading them. He sounded authentic and the people followed him like sheep to the slaughter. This is all very contemporary and we need to be careful to whom we listen and whom we follow. Everything that sounds authentic and biblical may not be so. There are many warnings in the New Testament about false prophets who seek to lead people away from God (Matt. 24:23-26; 2 Cor. 11:13; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 3-4). God deals with them in due time.

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17:1-14

Note how quickly Ahithophel was to seek to take the initiative. He wanted to make himself indispensable to Absalom, to be, as it were, the power behind the throne. He spoke very confidently (evil men usually do, as do critics) and seemed to be successful (4). But there is something we have forgotten, something neither Ahithophel nor Absalom reckoned on:- David's prayer in 15:31. In chapter 16 there is no sign of answered prayer, as we see David weary and dispirited (16:14) and yet taking the attitude of leaving the issue to God (16:12). The first sign of answered prayer is in Absalom's calling on Hushai for a second opinion regarding the next move. That must have disappointed or even alarmed Ahithophel and he may have been bitter, taking the attitude that it was poor reward for all he had done for Absalom (15:12;16:20). Always remember that men and women who are hungry for power have little or no sense of loyalty to anyone. They simply make use of people. What Absalom and Ahithophel forgot, or perhaps knew but ignored, was God's involvement in the situation. And God was against them (14). The only explanation why Absalom sought counsel from Hushai after his trusted counsellor Ahithophel had spoken is that God put it in his mind and heart to do so. No matter the evil in a situation we must never think that God's Holy Spirit is excluded or hindered. He is sovereign in His working and He causes men to do God's will, even though God is not in their thoughts. Just as the Holy Spirit at times constrains and impels men to take a certain course of action, so at other times He lays hold on men and frustrates and prevents their actions. We have very good grounds for trusting ourselves to God. At the present stage of the situation it is very unlikely that David was aware that God was working so significantly on his behalf. Of course, there are a great many things we are not aware of and God is not obliged to tell us in advance all He is doing. He asks us to trust Him. It is a safe and wise thing to do.

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17:1-14

We must still consider the part played by Hushai in his significant intervention in the situation. Remember, of course, that he did not barge in precipitately. He was invited to give his counsel and such was the wisdom of his words and the accuracy of his observations that his advice carried weight. Hushai must have been aware of the delicacy and danger of his position when Absalom spoke, making it clear that the favourite counsellor had already spoken. It must have crossed his mind that this could have been a trap to expose him as a spy and a traitor. But Hushai's words were wise in a military and psychological sense. He pointed out that, at the start of Absalom's coup, David's loyal men would be fierce with anger, ready to fight bitterly. He emphasised that there was no telling the exact location of David, whose wise advisers would be concerned for his safety and might well have set a trap for Absalom's men. Even a partial victory for David's men right at the start of the war would demoralise Absalom's men and possibly lead to defections (9-10). Hushai's master-stroke came in v.11 when he suggested that the whole army of Israel should be led in person by Absalom rather than twelve thousand chosen by and led by Ahithophel. (Note in v.1-3 the repetition of 'I'.) In advising such a vast military action it seems Hushai was actually endangering David but, of course, he knew what he was doing, as the following verses make plain. But Hushai knew only in part the significance of what he was doing. God had greater designs, as v.14 makes plain. We err if we assess what God is doing only on the basis of what we can see and evaluate. There are many times when God is working significantly in us, for us and through us without our being aware of it. One result of this is that when the victory emerges in full view, we are the first to say. "It must have been God's doing, not ours." We are saved from the dread danger of spiritual pride.

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17:15-23

This all reads like a typical spy story with various things going wrong and yet being retrieved. Hushai's going to the priests would not necessarily arouse suspicion. The priest's sons (15:27) were in their action station waiting for messages of the kind they may have carried to David at other times. This time they were seen by a lad who may have had more than a passing interest in the maidservant, so he went and told Absalom. Perhaps all he wanted was that his rivals for the girl should be eliminated. The two young men fled to Bahurin (18), which was the home town of Shimei who had cursed David (16:5). But not all in that town were against David and the quick thinking of a woman gave the messengers safety. Then we have again the question of the rightness or wrongness of the woman's deliberate lie. Knowing the situation as one of an unjustified military coup against God's anointed king and God's precious work, would our high moral stance suggest that the woman should have said, "The men you seek are down the well"? It is easy to criticise, and easy to say what should be done when we are not actually in the situation. Should we say that what is allowable in war is not allowed in peace-time? The fact of the matter is that God makes use of all kinds of people and behaviour but He is never the author of evil. David was given time to prepare for the military confrontation; a conflict he had not chosen and which he was to grieve over. What of Ahithophel, the man who seemed set for power long-term? He saw now that he had no place with Absalom nor with David. He was trapped in a situation of his own making and he was finished. Perhaps he became aware in a blinding moment that it was God who had blocked all his designs. Such was his desolation that he committed suicide. We do not know when or by what influences he first began to go contrary to God. Perhaps Ahithophel did not know. Perhaps what hit him hardest was an awareness that all along he had been duped by the Devil and had lost everything in his lust for power. It can so easily happen that people sell their spiritual birthright and end up with nothing (Heb. 12:16). Watch and pray.

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17:24-29

There are three things to note in this short reading. David came to Mahanaim and would no doubt be well aware of the significance of that place from the story of Jacob in Genesis 32. It was the place where Jacob had a significant confrontation with his brother Esau; where the angels of God met him so that he named the site the place of two camps or two armies; where Jacob was finally confronted by God to bring an end to the complications of a life in which he had for so long been wrestling against God (Gen. 32:1-2, 9-13, 24-30). David would have been aware that he was at a significant crisis point in his own life. It may well have been that he was aware of his dependence on God's spiritual hosts to win the battle. We do well to remember that in spiritual warfare mere human resources are insufficient (Eph. 6:10ff; 2 Cor. 10:3-4). In v.25 we are told that Joab, who had been commander of the army of Israel, had been replaced by Amasa, which signified that Joab had adhered to David in loyalty. No doubt this encouraged David, even though he knew full well from past incidents that Joab was not an easy man to control. David had difficult men on his side to cope with. Their skills were valuable but they had to be watched carefully. The third thing to note is the group of people who brought provisions, and of course a great deal of encouragement, to David and his people in time of need. If we look back to 9:1-5 and 10:1-4 we see that the actions of Makir and Shobi (son of Nahash and brother of Hanun) stemmed from gratitude and regret regarding past dealings with David. They made it plain their sympathies were with David. Barzillai was an old man (19:32), full of grace and wisdom as we shall yet see. No one is ever too old to serve the king, and the ministry of encouragement is both valuable and vital. It is sad it is exercised so little.

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18:1-8

It is important to note first of all the encouragements being given to David at this significant crisis point in his life and service. At the end of the previous chapter we have an example of how God, through kind men, prepared a table of provision and refreshment for David virtually in the presence of his enemies (Ps. 23:5). In today's passage we see that David had around him such an army of loyal men that he could divide it into three divisions. David also had three commanders whom he could trust, men of capacity, and he must have been

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aware of just how much better his situation was than when he first fled from Jerusalem. We must see also the great change in David. Not only is he seen as a decisive leader once again, but he was also ready to take his place at the head of his army. This is a great contrast to the casual and ominous attitude in 11:1. But David was not arrogant and he saw the point of his loyal commanders' advice (2b-3). However, we must be amazed by the value the men set on their king. They must have known all about David's former defects and failures, his impulsiveness and indecisiveness, and yet they saw, behind and beyond that, the fact of his calling by God. They knew the hand of God had been on David in the past and that it would be so again and they recognised him for what he was, a man of God called to the service of God, and they were prepared to go with him under his leadership. We do not know how they reacted to David's plea for gentleness regarding his son Absalom, nor can we see how such gentle personal care could be exercised in the context of what promised to be a fierce battle. What we do see very clearly is the hurt and confusion of David's own feelings and thoughts regarding his errant and rebellious son. He was a father, and as such would grieve over a prodigal son, especially if he felt his own failures had contributed to his son's rebellion.

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18:9-18

The word 'happened' (chanced RSV) seems to suggest coincidence or accident in the manner of Absalom's death but what we have to see is the simplicity and swiftness of the overthrow of the rebel son. Why Absalom and his soldiers were making their way through thick forest is not clear and it seems a strange strategy for horsemen. Obviously the encounter with David's men was totally unexpected and this may indicate that Absalom was far too confident about the outcome of the military confrontation. We could see in the incident evidence of the activity of God in afflicting Absalom with a spirit of blindness in order to bring him to judgment. We must never forget the activity of God in human situations where evil seems to be taking the initiative. Be quite clear: the Devil never 'calls the tune'. There is something ironic but just in the fact that Absalom's long flowing hair, which was his pride and joy (2 Sam. 14:25-26), was in fact the means of his downfall. There is something very humiliating in the ignominy of his death. We do not and we must not gloat over the death of any man, not even our enemy, but proud Absalom must have felt grotesque and ridiculous hanging by his hair from the thick branches of a tree. This was no way to die for a man whose ambition was to steal the throne of his father. What we have to see is how puny evil is in the context of the sovereign providence of God. Absalom's evil scheme had not been frustrated by God at its beginning because it was part of the outworking of God's rebuke of David because of his sins. It was also the effective means whereby Absalom's own evil was exposed and brought to judgment. We may often be perplexed by God's permissions of evil but we must always be quite clear that God knows what He is doing and is doing it by the right and best methods.

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18:9-18

Pause with this passage to see how, as events develop, men are exposed for what they really are. We are reminded from v.4-5 that David's words regarding Absalom were an order not a weak plea, and the order was given publicly. This is why the man who found Absalom did not strike to kill him but reported to Joab, whom he regarded as one of the king's trusted men. The young man described himself as someone who could not be bought or bribed, a man with loyal sympathy for the king, but he knew full well that Joab was ruthless and would always act in the way that would be to his own advantage (11-13). We see in v.14 that Joab was not a man to bother about finer things like scruples of love, loyalty or honesty, and in no time Absalom was dead. Joab's powerful personality is seen in his swift recall of the troops (16), preventing any further bloodshed. Absalom's men fled to their homes and all that was left was the memorial pillar Absalom had erected previously to try to make sure he was not forgotten. In some ways Absalom was a pathetic character and yet he was ruthless, as Joab had discovered (14:28-33). There is no doubt Joab hated Absalom for that. Joab had no time for rivals to his personal power (3:26-27). He was ruthless, as the swift murder of Uriah had made plain. He asked no questions (11:14-15). We shall read more about the ups and downs of Joab's career, and in the end he sided against David's son Solomon in the contest for the throne. It seems Joab was a man who considered people to be mere tools to be used to gain his own ends: tools to be cast aside when they had served their purpose. When you come across men or women like this never trust them.

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18:19-33

A simple reading of the passage conveys all the facts, paints the picture and conveys the atmosphere. What we have to do is to consider the persons involved. Ahimaaz, a trusted servant of David, was eager to carry the news of victory to the king, possibly hoping to tell the news of Absalom's death in the kindest way. Joab, regarding the young man either as a friend or a useful instrument for the future, or even not wanting Ahimaaz to be too close to David, refused to let him be the messenger, suggesting that the king's reaction could be severe and dangerous. The Cushite, being a slave, was regarded by Joab as expendable. In the end both messengers went and the priest's son was the first to arrive. David assumed Ahimaaz brought good tidings (27) and such was the king's glad welcome that he could not bring himself to tell the whole message. David seems to have been almost indifferent to the news of victory, wanting only to hear about his son. No doubt it was sympathy for David that kept Ahimaaz from breaking the news of Absalom's death, but deceit is never really constructive. The king turned to the Cushite and asked for the news he really wanted to hear. Neither messenger told of Joab's part in the death of Absalom. I wonder why! The Cushite's words may indicate he told the news of Absalom as a mere statistic with little feeling and less understanding of David's feelings. David's reaction was extreme, riot in his tears of sorrow but in his wish that he had died instead. David's thoughts about and love for his 'idol' son clouded and unbalanced every other consideration, and this is something that needs further study tomorrow.

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18:19-33

Breaking sad news is never easy and we must not assume that the grieved person will necessarily think and react as we do. We must also be careful when dealing with serious spiritual matters to remember what we see here in David, that family love and personal affection can outweigh all thoughts for the good of God's work. No doubt David's distress was in part remorse regarding his own earlier dealings of indulgence and harshness with his son. But David knew beyond any doubt that he was not a free man: he was the anointed and appointed king, servant and keeper of God's work and God's people. When he cried out in v.33, did he give any thought as to what effect it would have had on God's work if he had died and Absalom had taken over? David allowed his feelings to over-rule all that he knew of God and of God's call to service. His feelings, not his God-instructed thinking, made him insist that some place had to be found in God's plan for his son. He refused to see or to acknowledge that by nature, temperament, attitude and actions, Absalom had made plain that he was not in sympathy with, nor in submission to, God in what God ordained. There is an important lesson here for all who have to make decisions regarding the on-going development of the work of the Gospel. When we begin to 'accommodate' people and to give them places of influence because we like them or admire them rather than because of their proven spiritual aptitude and reliability, we simply create complications and hindrances. David's obsessive, emotional attachment to Absalom was a self-gratifying thing. It could never have been God-glorifying, and God brought the relationship to an end. In his surge of distress David forgot two things: the blessings of God that had delivered him and his work and opened the future for service, and the duties to God which were the reasons for his deliverance. First things must come first, and family cannot have that first place. Read Jesus' words in Matt. 10:34-39.

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19:1-8

In spite of all his defects Joab could at times see things very clearly and his firm plain speaking to David rescued both the king and his work. We must see here that David was indulging in a tremendous bout of self-pity, which is a demoralising and destructive thing. Reacting in a thoroughly worldly way rather than in a spiritual way David cast a cloud of misery over the whole of the people who had served him so loyally, counting not the danger or the cost. Absalom's rebellion may have been crushed but the Devil was virtually on the point of winning a massive battle on a psychological level and Joab could see the possibility of the whole army deserting. After all, who would want to serve a king who so totally devalued both the persons and the service given to him? Joab's rebuke was deserved and it had the desired effect, because it snapped David out of

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his morbid preoccupation with Absalom and made him take his place again as the leader of the people. The effect was almost immediate (8). There is a word here for all who are called to leadership in God's work and to the shepherding of God's people. There are many sore and deep hurts but by and large they must be carried in private because the people look to the leader for encouragement and inspiration as well as instruction and challenge. There is a secret cost to be borne alone and, at times, even one's closest, most trusted, and most spiritual friends will fail to be aware of their leader's need for human support. Jesus found that to be so in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-41) where the aloneness added to the agony which He bore. And He bore the agony for those friends who left Him alone. Paul knew a similar isolation in 2 Tim. 4:16. Should there not have been someone to be a human comforter? Joab was good at challenge; but challenge is easier to give than comfort and encouragement.

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19:1-8

Read these verses again and remind ourselves how easy it is to concentrate on a person's obvious and successive faults and to forget to give credit for all the achievements and victories that have established a work of God long-term. In our studies we have not been slow to expose the faults of David and the sad trail of consequences that introduced such confusion to the work he was called to do. We have also noted the fluctuations and complications in David's personality, but we have tended to forget that God has chosen the weak things of the world to do His work (1 Cor. 1:26-29). That being so, we should now marvel at just how much David had accomplished in spite of all the difficulties he had faced. He began with a disorganised, demoralised collection of tribes and, under God, he had made them into a nation to be the instrument of God for the future. We should remember the astonishing mixture of personalities involved, people with jealousies, ambitions, mixed motives and some ruthless in the matter of achieving their objectives. Some were steady in love and loyalty and others had to be coaxed and won over again and again. Some were quick to see the issues and to take action, and some were so slow it seemed they would cause the work to grind to a halt. That is a picture of the 'congregation' David had to minister to, the group he had to mould into a working body, to teach, encourage and lead. David coped with all that and with his own personality, over which he may have struggled and grieved more than we shall ever know. It was a miracle of God's grace. It is right to give all the glory to God, but we grieve God if we do not speak worthily of the man who was God's servant. After all, God spoke highly of David both before and after his years of service (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). When we focus on a person's sins and forget their manifest service, we are the ones who are spiritually defective.

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19:9-15

There had been uncertainty and confusion in the leadership of the nation. Some had followed Absalom and some David; and now there were both confusion and tension among the people. They were having to come to terms with the choices they had made. It is always so when factions arise within the people and work of God. Self-appointed leaders arise and their strong personalities, rather than their spiritual character and capacity, draw people after them. Absalom had done that, but now he was dead and his cause discredited. The people then began to recall the benefits they had had under the leadership of David and they were looking for someone among the elders to take the initiative, to bring about reconciliation, so that the past could be put behind them. There would, of course, be hurts and suspicions and these would explain the hesitation on the part of some. No doubt there would be calculations as to who and which party would have most influence with the king as the situation developed. David knew about the 'popular' feelings and he took the initiative, challenging his own tribe of Judah about their reluctance to return. Their slowness must have grieved David. It hurts when those you regard as closest to you and from whom you expect glad and willing co-operation prove to be reluctant. Was it their pride that kept them back? In view of the eagerness of the other tribes were they afraid they would not have pride of place as formerly? Were they disposed to stay outside the new movement if they could not be sure of leadership? Places of prominence are for those who prove worthy of them and the allocation is in God's hands alone (Matt. 20:23). Besides, there are always plenty of places in the front line of the battle where the cost is greatest. David's appeal and challenge, together with the promise of promotion to Amasa, won over the whole of Judah. The developments of this 'return' were still to come.

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19:16-23

It is difficult to know what to make of Shimei. He had been brash and bold to curse David when David was on the run and all the odds seemed against him but now, when David was manifestly in power and had the popularity of the people, Shimei seems excessively 'humble', almost cringing. It is not clear why he brought with him such an entourage of men from the house of Saul. Perhaps it was to bolster his own courage but perhaps it was to impress and influence David, suggesting that Shimei was not a man to be trifled with. On the face of it, the confession of Shimei was without qualification. It could not be otherwise because his public insult to and humiliation of David was common knowledge and the enormity of the man's action was remembered vehemently by Abishai. We cannot but feel that Shimei was protesting overmuch, rushing to the Jordan to take a prominent place among those ferrying the king and his possessions over the river (17-18). In such situations and with such people only time will reveal the reality or otherwise of their change of heart. When we look forward to 1 Kings 2:8-9 what we must see is not a dying man's desire for revenge but his wise counsel to his son who succeeded him, making plain that there had been no long-term evidence that Shimei was a changed man. Some people are not to be trusted and in the context of God's service it is best that we should not commit ourselves to them (John 2:23-25; Rom. 16:17). David was wise. The work was in a crisis situation, with the possibility of re-uniting the people for future service, and the king realised that to have an 'execution' that could be seen as personal revenge would serve no purpose. Things had to be handled gently and wisely. Rebuke and retribution could safely be left in God's hand. We begin to see the re-emergence of David's integrity, dignity and faith. When he had been 'under-dog', he had no option but to submit to Shimei (16:5ff). Now that positions were reversed he refused to come down to personal revenge. Shimei was given another chance.

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19:24-30

In order to understand this passage we need to read 2 Sam. 9:1-13; 16:1-4; and then today's verses. Remember David's love for Jonathan and how much he owed to Jonathan's love, loyalty, service and encouragement. Out of deep gratitude he showed generous love to Mephibosheth and, without doubt, that love was returned to the king by the poor, crippled son of Jonathan. Then in chapter 16 David jumped to conclusions, believing the lies of Ziba, not pausing to consider that Mephibosheth, a true son of his father, would never act in such a treacherous way. He made no attempt to confirm or contradict Ziba's story, preferring to believe the gossip and lies. Pause to consider how easily we do the same. Why do we believe wrong about those who have formerly served us well? If we feel hurt by what is supposed to have been said and done, should we not go to the person and ask if there is truth in it? In our story we have just read of David's gracious attitude and forgiveness of an enemy, and now we find him mean-minded and grudging in attitude to a man who had loved him and stayed loyal to him all along. Why is it that we can be cruel, neglectful and grudging to those to whom we owe much and at the same time be warm, gracious and generous to those who have been calculating and perverse? Read the story carefully. David took no notice of the lame man's pathetic condition and appearance, ignoring the fact that the signs of neglect were in fact token of his sorrow for all the king had suffered. David challenged Mephibosheth in a truculent way as to why he had not come to his side in active service, ignoring the man's lameness. The reply in v.26-28, spoken in manifest honesty, must have shamed David, but instead of saying 'Sorry' the king closed the conversation by allowing Ziba to keep half Mephibosheth's inheritance. We can only hope that the words in v.30 made the king blush with shame. How sad that a great man like David could be so changeable: kind and gracious to an enemy, but cruel to someone who had been so lovingly loyal.

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19:31-40

We find a great variety of people associated with David and they had to be handled in different ways. If we look back to yesterday's passage and think of Ziba, recognising him to be a powerful man in the tribe of Benjamin, Saul's tribe, we see that David may have felt the need to placate him or at least not to alienate him. Some people need 'kid-glove' treatment. But others, like Barzillai, have no axe to grind. This old man had come

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to David's side and had ministered to him without any thought of reward. He stood by the king when David was going through a hard, unpopular spell. Barzillai was rich and he was also generous, which is not always the case. He was also a man of sanctified common sense and saw that the king's court was not the place for a man of his age. He was not the kind of old man that expected to be the focus of attention nor would he ever be the kind of person who would allow himself to become a burden to others, distracting them from the service of God. We cannot but admire old Barzillai and recognise that such a man of grace in any congregation would also be a man of prayer, encouragement and stability. David could be sure of this man's prayers, and David could also be sure that if the younger man, Kimham, was commended by Barzillai then he would be a good and loyal servant. This old man shines like a light in a somewhat dark situation in which so many sought their own advancement. He was not the kind of man to go into spiritual 'semi-retirement' simply because he was getting on in years and no longer able to dash around as younger people did. He seems to symbolise the kind of aged saints who, behind the scenes and with little recognition, uphold the work and the servants of God in prayer.

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19:41-43

The brightness of the selfless service of Barzillai highlights the envy, pride, jealousy and self-centredness of the men of Judah and of Israel. They spoke as if both the king and the work of the kingdom belonged to them as 'shareholders'. It had all to do with pride of place, prominence and recognition. David may have given the first impetus to this quarrel when he made a direct appeal to his own tribe in 19:11-12. It could have been regarded as favouritism by the ten tribes of Israel, who said they were the first to make a move to bring David back. Judah replied that the king was near of kin to them. Israel replied that they were ten tribes compared to the two, Benjamin and Judah. The argument grew fiercer and fiercer, and if we fail to see the activity of Satan in this we are blind indeed. The Devil delights to set the people of God within one congregation at odds with each other because it is a sure way of causing the work of God to be neglected. Pride is a terrible disease and spiritual pride can prove fatal in terms of effective service. Some want their social standing to be recognised as giving them an upper place, some feel their intellectual or business gifts should be accorded place, some feel length of service should give priority, some feel their professional status makes them automatically spiritual leaders. How different all that is from Him who girded Himself with a towel and did the work of the lowliest household servant (John 13: 1-5,12-17). Keep in mind that it was virtually within the shadow of the Cross that the disciples argued about place and priority, possibly feeling that Peter, James and John had been shown favouritism (Lk. 9:46-48). Perhaps it was Peter and the two brothers who started the argument. Real spirituality is manifest in being willing to be nothing so that Christ can be everything (John 3:25-30).

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20:1-2

The situation described yesterday provided the almost perfect opportunity for an evil man to do harm to David and to his cause. Remember that after the divisions caused by Absalom's rebellion the people were just beginning to come together in a new unity under the kingship of David. Remember too the great crowd of the men of Benjamin who had come with Shimei to declare their loyalty to David (19:16-18). In that crowd there was a Benjaminite who had neither desire nor intention to go with David. The various translations describe him as a worthless fellow (RSV), a trouble maker (NIV), or a man of Belial (AV). It just 'happened' that he was there ready to take opportunity when feelings were running high. But we do not believe in coincidence. We believe rather that the Devil has well laid wiles, plans and stratagems and was waiting his chance. What is more, the Devil always seems to have someone ready to do his evil work, someone whose pride has been stung or who has a grudge of some kind. The spirit motivating Sheba was the same evil spirit that had inspired and driven on Saul, that great figure of the house of Benjamin. It is a spirit that is irreconcilably opposed to God and to the work of God. Nothing that anyone said would have changed Sheba. He seems to have been a man of some personality and drive and, sensing the tensions and complaints among the people, he took his chance and led a defection in which, of course, he was the leader. It is so easy to divide a work of God. It is much harder to be a peacemaker. But those who seek to heal, reconcile and maintain the unity of the Spirit are the ones who are blessed of God (Matt. 5:9; Eph. 4:1-3; Rom. 12:18).

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20:3-13

Keep in mind that a new stage of David's kingship and work had just begun. Keep in mind also what we have said about the inevitable activity, opposition and confusing work of the Devil. There was need to be on guard. David was aware of this and it is evident in his action in v.3. The explanation is clear if we refer back to 16:20-23. It would have been a grotesque situation if David had taken back his concubine 'wives' who had been taken by his son. What he did was in some ways an act of renunciation of a former part of his life, the area of wrong relationships, which had been his weakness and which had introduced all sorts of complications into his life. It had also introduced a whole sequence of hindrances into his God-given work. Perhaps David had at long last learned to recognise his weak areas in personality and was setting guard against them. The decisiveness of David in v.4ff indicated that he was taking a clearer view of his work and his responsibility for it. He saw that Sheba was an even greater danger than Absalom had been and he knew that this evil man had to be dealt with before he could set up fortified cities to act as a long-term opposition (6). We have no idea why Amasa delayed beyond the set time (5) but it led to Joab's men (v.7) being sent out under the command of Abishai. We can imagine Joab's chagrin and, when Amasa (who had replaced Joab as David's commander) appeared, there followed the gruesome story of treacherous murder. By v.11, 13 it was Joab who was the undisputed leader. What a tangled situation David had to rule over and guide, but it was all emerging out of actions by various people in past years. Wrongdoing can have a long trail of costly consequences and we have to live with them and work through them. It is all very contemporary in relation both to society and church. There is a lot of double-dealing and character assassination on the part of men and women whose desire for influence and place drives them on.

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20:14-26

Sheba, enemy of the work of God, was still busy building up his support. There was to be no future for him and in due time those who had sided with him would be confounded, not just embarrassed. Sheba's end came in a most ignominious way and the story is not a pleasant one. Judgment, in the shape of Joab's forces, caught up with Sheba, who no doubt felt fairly secure in his fortress city, but must have been alarmed by the battering-rams at the walls. He assumed all would support him, but the wise woman became the one who negotiated for wisdom and for the safety of the city. When the citizens heard her wise words, Sheba's fate was sealed, the siege was withdrawn, and Joab and his army returned to Jerusalem. We are not told how David reacted when the army came home led by Joab but there was nothing he could do, at least at that juncture. The king made other leadership appointments in the interest of the establishment and continuation of the work. To what extent David was aware that God was in control of all the developments, and to what extent David was aware of God's presence with himself we are not told. We have to remember that God is never absent and the times, seasons and developments are all in His hand all the time (Acts 1:6-7). Power belongs to God and to God alone (Ps. 62:11AV) and He is the One who raises up and casts down (Dan. 4:17). But there is a final lesson here, a word of warning to any disaffected person who seeks to stir up a movement of opposition to and contradiction of the man God has chosen, raised, set in place and disciplined as the leader and guide of His people and work. The fact that the leader is far from perfect and that a long list of his defects and failures can be produced is no justification for usurping his leadership. God's appointed leader is answerable to God, and that is a solemn thought for him.

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21:1-2

We are entering the last section of this book and we read of a number of incidents in David's life which may not be in chronological order. We do not concern ourselves with such matters and concentrate on the spiritual lessons to be learned from God's dealings with David and David's dealings with God. Of course we must remember that there was more going on in David's life than is recorded here. In 1 Chronicles 17:1-4 onwards we have the account of David's desire to build a house for God (which he was not allowed to do) and his preparation materially and in terms of spiritual administration for the House of God. This should make us remember that David's work was battling and preparing the ground for what his son Solomon would build in the next generation. David had been told this by God in 2 Sam. 7:8-17 and he was prepared to do the

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groundwork although he knew he would never see the real, long-term results of his work. This is something we must all keep in mind so that we will be preserved from devaluing our God-given task by assessing it simply by what can be seen in our own little life-time. Think of Jesus' words in John 4:38 and remember that we in turn pass on the work to those coming after us. It is a challenge and responsibility but it is also a comfort and encouragement, especially when we read Heb. 11:39-40 and realise that past, present and future are all required for the completeness of God's work. But past, present and future are connected in another way, as today's verses make plain. We read of a prolonged famine bringing great pressure on the nation; of David seeking the face of the Lord, exercised as to how to understand what was happening; and God giving David a very clear and specific answer to his enquiry. David was told that past wrongs explained present problems in the nation. That is a New Testament principle (Gal. 6:7-8) which politicians, sociologists, humanists and religious do-gooders refuse to recognise as they consider the problems of our own generation.

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21:1-2

The language of v.1 indicates that this was not a simple failure of one year's crops but a famine of increasing intensity, bringing with it terrible pressure in terms of human suffering and economic downturn. The ravages of the famine would be evident everywhere, and public feeling would be running high, possibly looking for someone to blame. After all he had been through, it would be natural for David to wonder if this national crisis had something to do with his own sins and failures. If his costly preparations for building the Temple were going on at the same time, people may well have been resentful, feeling that the money could be better spent on famine relief. We are not surprised that David sought the face of the Lord and we must recognise that the many "fires" he had gone through had made him a much more spiritually-minded man than formerly. Famine was often the experience of nations in the Middle East but the length of this one caused David to sense that there was spiritual significance in the event. God was saying something and saying it persistently. We all do well at times to stop, stand back, and look at our lives and ask what God is saying to us. It is not wise simply to go on doing what we have always done, assuming that this is the best continuing pattern for our lives. When David enquired of God he was told that the root cause of the present crisis was something that happened long before, something that was the action of the house of Saul, not David. Away back in Joshua 9:15-21, although there had been deception, a covenant, pact or promise had been made with the Gibeonites that, even though they were 'outsiders' they could live among and serve God's people. At some point, Saul seems to have broken this covenant, possibly to hold on to his own power. God had marked this evil deed and the time had now come for its judgment. There is a solemn lesson here, expressed in Jesus' words in Matt. 23:34-36, to the effect that the consequences of past evils can fall on the new generation. This should help us to understand some of what we read in our daily papers.

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21:1-9

As the story develops it is plain that David saw the issue clearly from the standpoint of God's righteousness. God's people Israel had been called in God's blessing to be a testimony and a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 42:6-7; 49:6). The honour of God's name and the integrity of His Word and promises were in the hand of the Israelites and, if they broke their word to the Gibeonites who were close to them, what would other nations think? There had been injustice done by Saul and his house, and the innocent blood shed cried for reparation. This is something we can understand if we recall the atrocities carried out by Nazi Germany during 1939-45. Those responsible had to be brought to judgment. David enquired of the Gibeonites how he could make expiation, or atonement, or amends and the Gibeonites made it quite clear that they were concerned with righteousness and justice but not with money or with mere revenge. It was their future life in the land that was at stake (5). They seemed to be aware that the spirit of Saul lived on in his descendants. There is realism here, because just as the Devil never changes in his enmity towards the people and work of God, so there are some families (not just individuals), some philosophies, and some religions that remain dogged and resolute in their unbelief and opposition to all that pertains to God and the Gospel. A token number of the sons of Saul, representing the whole house of Saul, were to die to pay the penalty and David agreed to the plan. The fact that the execution took place before the Lord (9) is recorded to emphasise that the issue was righteous and necessary

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judgment, and not mere cruelty or personal vengeance. Remember that it was God Himself who set the whole process in motion by the famine (1). Note also that David, in sparing Mephibosheth, made plain that he was keeping the promise he had made so many years earlier. Note also that the whole business was carried out by the king as the chief executive of the nation's system of justice. No one was allowed to take the law into his own hands.

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21:10-14

The earlier verses have to do with David's sense of justice and we must not assume that he carried out his duties without great personal cost and heartache. We must remember this cost also when ministers are called on to expound judgment as they minister faithfully in God's Word. No man who loves the people God has given into his care can preach hard things easily. Remember to pray when ministry is solemn! But we have clear evidence in today's passage of the compassionate heart of David. When he heard of the devotion with which Rizpah watched over the bodies of the sons of Saul so that they would not be shamed, his heart was moved. He went personally to Jabesh-gilead (cf.1 Sam.31:8-13) and brought the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan so that they and the other nine might be given honourable burial. There is a lesson here regarding how we need to treat with human respect even those who have disagreed with us and harmed us. It is all too easy, in the interest of what we regard as spirituality and dedication to sound biblical doctrine, to forget and indeed to ignore deliberately the tender human feelings of others. There can be a coldness and even a harshness in our standing for what we believe to be right, but there is no sign of that in our Lord Jesus Christ who is always our example as well as our Saviour. In Him grace and truth were together. When we become the kind of people who are insensitive to and just not aware of other people's tender feelings, something has gone wrong with our Christian lives and our walk with God. If we deliberately ignore people's feelings and are indifferent to their hurt, then we are more in line with the cruelty of the Devil than with the kindness of Jesus.

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21:15-22

If this passage is set historically at this later stage of David's life and work, then we have a clear indication that the battles against the enemies of God, His people and His work go on with unabated intensity right to the end. We must note this emphasis in v.15, 18, 19 and be on our guard against carelessness and complacency. We are involved in spiritual warfare, and behind the human instruments there is the great enemy Satan, whose determination and methods are to be reckoned on. We do well to remind ourselves often of Paul's words in Eph. 6:10-20, not least his words about prayer being at the heart of the spiritual battle. We must note also that in v.16, 18, 19, 20 there is an indication of giants being involved. The forces of evil are never short of 'big' characters to lead the assault but we must not give way to fear. We need to learn the lesson taught us by the youthful David when he faced Goliath. The powers of evil, however blustering, are no match for the man who fights in the name of the Lord (1 Sam. 17: 41-47). Our weapons are not worldly. We do not set personality against personality, technique against technique, nor even argument against argument (2 Cor. 10:3-5). We stand in the victory won for us by God in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by faith we claim it for ourselves and for others. In our story the victory was fought and won. But take note of the honesty and realism of Scripture. We are told that David the king grew weary and was in danger (15-16). He had not grown tired of fighting the battles of the Lord but they had taken their toll in terms of human and spiritual leadership. But David had men who had eyes to see and to recognise that their leader was being left with too much to do. They saw that his spiritual leadership, and the encouragement he gave to all the people, were more important than his actual participation in the battle. The loss of a spiritual leader is serious, unless there is someone ready and prepared by God to take over.

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22:1-4

This whole chapter, which is virtually the same as Psalm 18, is David's song of deliverance, related historically to 2 Sam. 7:1. But coming here, near the end of the story, we can regard the song as David's personal testimony regarding God's dealings with him. If the setting is in fact the time of 2 Samuel 7 then the song relates to the

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time before David's great sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, but the language of deliverance and salvation right through the chapter makes plain that David was fully aware of the dangers to his life and service stemming from his own personality as well as from his enemies. We must be careful, with David and with others used by God, not to concentrate on one incident, be it success or failure, because in that way we can come to a false spiritual evaluation. What we have to see in these opening verses is a man whose mind and heart are fixed on God, a man who is very aware of all that he owes to his God. In Ps. 18:1 the song begins with David declaring his love for God. His heart is involved in his words and that is the only way in which our words, be they testimony or preaching, carry with them the living touch of God's Spirit. Before David actually speaks of his varied experiences he speaks of his God, describing Him in a whole variety of ways, each of which descriptions could warrant a whole sermon. Perhaps the lesson here is that we need to remind ourselves to think more often, more specifically, and in a grander way about our God. We sing of Him to whom belongs all might, majesty and power, the God who is ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored. Our God is great!

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22:1-4

If our God is great, and if He is as personal a God as these verses declare, then we need more than one day to consider Him. It is not for nothing that we are called to be still, to stop our endless rushing and involvements, in order that we might become aware of God (Ps. 46:10-11). If we are to cope with the spiritual warfare of true service, then we need to learn that God is someone to whom we run to hide (Ps. 57:1). When for various reasons we feel cast down and desolated, full of perplexity and questionings, then we must take ourselves to task and remind ourselves that God is the God who saves His people (Ps. 43:3-5). We have the same kind of security expressed in Ps. 61:1-4 and it is wonderful to find Scripture bringing together the ideas of strength and sheltering wings. The mighty God of salvation is the God of exquisite tenderness and He cares for His people in a very personal and immediate way. In Prov. 18:10 we are told that the name of the Lord, which signifies the character of God, is a strong tower into which the righteous man runs to hide, and it is from that safe shelter that he wages his battles. It is not cowardly to run for shelter when the assaults of the enemy are fierce. Part of the Devil's technique is to unsettle and to demoralise us and, if possible, to get us to act precipitately. But, sheltering in God, we are taught to choose the right time and the right grounds on which to fight. What a God we have! He keeps us safe and He keeps us right. He is certainly a God to be praised, and we have good cause from our own experience to praise Him, we who are 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'. Look to your God and let what you see undergird your whole life. Isaiah saw the glory of God; Ezekiel saw His throne; Daniel saw the plan; Jeremiah saw God watching over His word to perform it; Amos saw the hand of God on his life; and Paul saw the privilege of being called to the service of God Isa. 6:1-4; Ezek. 1:26-28; Dan. 2:1-2; Amos 7:14-16; Eph. 3:7-8).

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22:5-20

The language David uses to describe his experiences is both vivid and exciting but we must not fail to sense in v.5-6 his awareness of the depth and power of the evil that assailed him. This was not merely human conflict. The description of the effect of death, destruction and the grave (death, perdition and Sheol RSV) suggests successive waves of antagonism from an unseen kingdom of evil. So fierce was the conflict that David felt surrounded, attacked and trapped. It was then that he cried out to God and it seemed his distress was stronger than his faith. But God heard and in v. 8-16 we have a description of intervention in the human scene by the powerful God of creation. The imagery of this passage makes you think of the 'special effects' used by some film makers when they are trying to convey something that is ultimately beyond human comprehension. What is being conveyed by David's words is the limitless authority of God's power over the elements and shows the vast variety of His methods of acting on behalf of His people. In the midst of the roaring storm of circumstances, this great God reached down and by His own strong arm laid hold on, and lifted up His servant who had cried to him (17-20). Note how David describes what God did for him. God reached down, took him, drew him out of the floods, delivered him and brought him into a broad, secure place. All this God did because he delighted in David. We need to think of the hymns, 'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,' and 'My hope is built.' Yes, we are weak, but He is mighty and He holds us. When all around us gives way, He is there to hold,

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and all because He loves us in spite of everything. Read the first few verses of Psalm 40 and then think how you would express your testimony. Do you have a God who does things for you?

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22:21-25

Knowing what we have learned from our study of this book concerning David's sins, blunders, lapses of faith and disobedience, what are we to make of what seems to be a claim to sinlessness and uprightness? Of course, at many times in his life, his best times, David was indeed a man whose heart was fixed on God (Ps. 57:7 AV; 108:1 AV) and he is spoken of as a man after God's own heart (1Sam13:14; Acts 13:22). We do not ignore David's sins. After all, Scripture records them with honesty. But if we remember v.20 we see that David regarded his salvation, his deliverance, and all his blessings as coming solely from the free grace and favour of God, not from any deserving on his part. We cannot imagine David, even in his very best days, claiming that day by day he had maintained such a perfect, open and harmonious walk with God as these verses describe. What we must see is that deeper than all his sins, even the greatest ones, David's desire and determination were to go with God. This is why David was so desperately miserable whenever he strayed from God. It is clear from many of the Psalms that people looked at David's life and saw so many faults, defects and sins that they sometimes pronounced him finished, a man God would have nothing to do with. But it is difficult to condemn and write off a man and his work when it is manifest that God is continuing to use him, bless him, and make him a blessing to others. Men look on the outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:6-7) but God looks on the heart. God will have been aware of all the agonising struggling with his temptations and personality that David went through and what it cost him to hold to his commitment to God's calling, especially after his public failures. Do you ever wonder what it costs God's faithful servants to be His instruments of blessing to others? If you do, you will pray for them rather than criticise them, especially if they speak words like David's in these verses.

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22:26-31

There is something devastatingly simple about these verses which say so clearly that God behaves towards people as they do towards Him. Think of the story of Pharaoh where we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart against God, and God hardened Pharaoh's heart, confirming him in his evil choice (Exod. 8:15; 9:12). Think also of how the Israelites refused to go forward into the land of promise and so God prevented there going there (Num. 13:30 - 14:4, 20-24). We must be quite clear that if the habit of our inner life is in conflict with God then our daily experience will be collision with God. Think back to Psalm 1 which speaks so clearly of one way of life being established and the other perishing. Read also 1 Pet. 3:10-12, where Peter quotes from Ps. 34:11-17. Think of Jesus' words in Luke 6:37-38. But there is another aspect to this 'equitable' dealing that is essential for our consideration and encouragement. In the passage 2 Tim. 2:11-13, after three statements in terms of cause and effect, there is the glorious affirmation of God's faithfulness, and the comforting if humbling statement that even when we are faithless God remains faithful to His commitment to His people in love. If He were to deal with us only on the basis of deserving, He would be acting contrary to His nature. Having once pledged His love He will not withdraw it. We see this expressed wonderfully in Hosea 11:1-2, 7-9. But at the same time these words of David echo 1 Sam. 2:30 "Those who honour Me I will honour." In v.29 we must remember that a light is of use only if we walk in the light. In v.30 David is confident in His God. In v.31 David acknowledges that all God's ways are wise and right, that His promises can be counted on, and that all who trust will find God to be a safe refuge.

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22:32-43

In all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy, David knew, believed and had proved that he had a wonderful God. He did not doubt the existence, character, greatness, goodness and uniqueness of his God. He was praising God and bearing witness to Him, affirming with great enthusiasm that there is simply no one to be compared with his God. David was excited about his God in a way that many of us never are, possibly because we are more concerned with our own struggles than with the many, many mercies and deliverances we have received from God. It is healthy both humanly and spiritually to make time deliberately in order to count our

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blessings so that we will indeed be amazed by what God has done for us. In His faithfulness His mercies are renewed to us day after day (Lam. 3:22-23). When Micah thought about God's glorious faithfulness in forgiving His people, he also affirmed that there is no one like God (Mic. 7:18-20). When Jeremiah spoke of how God forgives and forgets the sins of His people, he went on to say that the greatness of God was beyond measurement (Jer. 31:33-37). Isaiah joined the chorus of the prophets who gloried in the greatness of their God and who yet saw the infinite tenderness of God in His care for His people (Isa.40:5, 8, 9-11, 13, 18, 25-26, 28-31). In v.36 the RSV speaks of God's help; the NIV speaks of God stooping down to make David great; but the A V reads, 'Thy gentleness has made me great.' When we are quiet enough to think clearly, we become aware that all God's dealings with us have indeed been gentle, with never a fraction more severity than was absolutely necessary. As a result we have been lifted up rather than knocked down, made strong not weak. The God we have remembers we are terribly human (Ps. 103:13-14) and makes allowance in a way even our friends fail to do at times. Read Isa. 42:3 and if you feel bruised, or if you feel faith flickering feebly, you have in God, made known to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, the very Person and help you need.

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22:44-51

It is important to keep in mind that David was rejoicing in what God had done for him and we can be quite sure that David would not have forgotten all the costly battles that he had been involved in. There is a time to declare and to rejoice in the victories God has given, but this must not be allowed to become a superficial triumphalism which gives the impression that the life of faith is easy victory. Before the story ends we will read again of David's failures, the failures of a mature man of God. Living by faith is a day-by-day challenge. In today's verses David seems to be recognising that God had not only kept His hand on him but also on his enemies, and this is a wonderful comfort and encouragement. It often seems that evil is carrying all before it, but that is not so. Evil is always under restraint and operates only by permission of God and to serve His purposes. This does not ignore the fact that often we give evil its opportunity by our foolishness, unbelief and disobedience. But, looking back over his life, David testifies that again and again it was God who worked deliverance for him. It was God who dealt with the enemy. It was God who constrained unbelieving people to show reverence and submission. When David considered all that had been good, positive and productive in his life, he could only say, and he said it gladly. 'This is the Lord's doing, and marvellous in our eyes' (Ps. 118:23). David was aware of God, the living God, in his life, and this is something we need to remind ourselves of far more than we do. It is when we forget that God is everywhere present, all knowing, all powerful and ever active, working His purposes out as year succeeds to year, that we become disheartened and are more aware of the dangers and difficulties than of the assurance of victory.

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22:44-51

Read this passage again in the light of David's affirmation that God is the living God (47), who deals with opposition (48), who brings him out, lifts him up and delivers him (49). Then read David's great doxology at the end of his life, recorded in 1 Chron. 29:10-14. In today's verses David rejoices in the triumphs God gives, in God's steadfast love which can be depended on, and in the thought that there is always a sure future for those God has called. These are themes we find again and again in the New Testament. Read Rom. 8:28-30, 35-39; 1 Pet. 1: 3-9; 1 John 3:1-3. We have a God to trust and to love and to serve, and, in company with and in the safe keeping of such a God, we can go safely into the future. Perhaps all David's trust and confidence is expressed in Psalm 23 which we tend to read and to sing in far too superficial a way. Many of an older generation can still recall the words spoken by King George VI in a wartime Christmas radio broadcast: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." He said to me, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way."' Did not Jesus say that He was the light of the world and that those who followed Him would have the light of life (John 8:12)? God is light and with Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). Walking with Him is safe and enjoyable. It is also secure and dependable, because with God there is never any shadow of change (Jas. 1:17). When for various reasons we stray and even hide from Him because we feel failures, He always calls for us to come home. That is the emphasis in Genesis 3:9.

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23:1-7

This is not quite the end of the story of David nor are these his very last words, as the record in 1 Chronicles 28-29 makes plain. This is his last song and he seems to be pondering, with amazement and with solemn joy, God's dealings with him. He looks right back to his beginnings as the youngest, and therefore the least significant, of the sons of Jesse, seemingly destined to be just a shepherd. No one, including himself, had any thought that God had plans for his life to raise him up to be a significant figure in redemption history. He was chosen of God, called to service, and for that service he was anointed with the enabling Spirit of God. This is not just the experience of a select number of men and women called to prominent service. It is true of every person drawn by God through the Spirit to faith in Christ. Read the wonderful words in Eph. 1:3-10, not getting lost in the details but seeing and feeling the thrill of being chosen and integrated into God's plan. This does not lead to pride but rather to a sense of wonder and privilege, as Paul speaks of it in 1 Cor. 1:26-31. This sense of wonder is something that should grow and deepen as we go on in God's service. It should thrill us and at the same time awaken in us an ever deepening sense of responsibility to be worthy of the God who has called us, transformed our lives and liberated our personalities. Think again of Paul's developing self assessment as he describes himself as the least of the apostles, less than the least of the saints, and the chief of sinners (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:15; Eph. 3:8). Sometimes we tend to be preoccupied with the cost and struggle of Christian service, and there *is* real cost. But to be chosen, raised up and commissioned to be spokesmen and women for God, and to be used by God for His glory and for the blessing and salvation of others, this is something to marvel at. Paul was aware of this at his conversion (Acts 26:16-19) and it was the motivation of his life from then on, as his words in Philip. 3:4-14 show. David obviously felt the same.

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23:1-7

David speaks of himself as the anointed servant king but commentators seem agreed that the words here (3-4) point forward to Christ, who in the fullest sense is God's Servant King who reigns in righteousness. We need only think of Jesus' words in Lk. 4:16-21, where he quotes from Isa. 61:1-2 to see that He is the true servant king, great David's greater son. But David must in real measure have been speaking about himself, recognising that it was by the Spirit of God that he was able to speak God's word to the people, making known God's will and way to them. Apart from God's blessing and empowering, David himself was nothing, and he was content to be nothing so that God could be everything (John 3:30). But as David has already said, known and felt, this did not in any way devalue him, for he was a chosen servant. What it did do to David was to make him very aware of the responsibility of being set to rule God's people (3). It is only when the king is right in himself, in his personal character and walk with God, exercising his rule and stewardship as unto God Himself, that he is a blessing and a help to the people. After all, every person who has been entrusted with a place of responsibility in God's work must lead by example (1 Pet. 5:1-3). What we are in ourselves before God, that and no more we will be in our service. The hymn-writer who said, 'Perish policy and cunning, perish all that fears the light,' was echoing Paul's exhortation in 2 Cor. 4:1-6. In v.4 we have a beautiful picture of the blessing that is brought to others by the presence and influence of a godly leader. Some people bring a chill cloud and atmosphere whenever they enter the company. There are other people who make you want to be good and to draw near to God.

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23:1-7

There is all the difference in the world, and in the world to come, between those who are in God's hand and those who, in unbelief and rejection, refuse to yield to Him. There is no future for the godless (6) and they are described as thorns, not only fruitless in terms of righteousness but plants that choke and debilitate the soil of society. Their end is to be burned, and v.7 seems to suggest that we should take great care when, for any reason, we have to deal with the godless. They are dangerous and not to be trusted. Alas, some Christians are not to be trusted, but that is not dealt with here. The great emphasis is to be found in David's God (5). Past, present and future seem to be referred to in that one verse. It was God who had made David's house what it was. It was God

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who had committed Himself to David in an everlasting covenant, and God does not change. In that covenant everything was arranged and secured in every part, because what God ordains He performs and brings to completeness (Phil. 1:6). The future is in God's sure hand and, regardless of what circumstances may be at any given stage, David believed God would bring to fruition his salvation and grant his every desire. This does not for a moment mean that David expected God to give in to his every passing whim. After a long pilgrimage with many fluctuations, David now saw and knew that his best was to be found in sweet and glad surrender to God. And as he walked with God his desires and longings were being brought more and more into conformity with God's good and perfect will. It is a wonderful release of personality and potential when we learn to rest in the Lord, to wait for Him, and to know that our times are indeed in His hand (Ps. 37:1-7; 31:14-16). In a very real sense David was saying here that all he wanted above everything else was that God's good will should be done in his life. That is the way of peace, joy, hope, assurance and fruitfulness. After all, God's will is good and perfect, and altogether acceptable (Rom. 12:1-2). God certainly makes a better job of running our lives than we do!

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23:8-39

Some will find it difficult to read what is simply a list of names, something of a roll of honour of men worthy of mention in the service of David down through the years of his kingship. No doubt there were many other faithful servants of the king, the unknown warriors like those who seldom if ever get an honourable mention in their lifetime or after, men and women without whose loving and loyal service the work of God would not be carried forward. Perhaps these were the characters considered most worthy of mention and even those not mentioned may have considered it right that these should be named. There is always danger in being selective, and that is why 'votes of thanks' in the context of the Christian church are so difficult to give. We need to remember God's choice of the weak to do His work (1 Cor. 1:26-29) and the insistence in 1 Cor. 12:22 that the most insignificant member is indispensable. In pondering this list of names, remember how often Paul mentions in his letters people who had served well and helped him in his ministry. There is a place for recognition, and certainly a place for expressing thanks. We have in this list indication that there was a group of three who were in some sense special (8, 13, 18-19, 22). Remember that Jesus had Peter, James and John within the Twelve. There is mention of a group called 'the thirty' (13, 18, 24), and at the end of the chapter we are told of thirty-seven in all. It is difficult to sort out the 'mathematics' of this chapter and it is best not to try. Perhaps down the years there seems to have been a core group of thirty whose number was made up from time to time to replace casualties. The point is they served loyally in a variety of situations, sometimes defending food supplies (11-12), sometimes facing great odds (18-19). Perhaps we are best to concentrate on the mention of Uriah (39) and to recall how shamefully David treated this man who had given him unqualified loyalty.

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23:8-39

At the heart of this catalogue of names (and it would be interesting to trace their individual stories) there is the moving account of the love, loyalty and dedication to the king of the three men in v.13-17. The setting of the story is the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 22:1-5; 2 Sam. 5:17-18). Whatever the occasion, it is clear David was feeling the pressure of leadership and spiritual responsibility. He may have spoken the words in v.15 openly to his trusted friends, because even the mightiest of leaders needs to have some to whom he can speak openly and honestly. But it may be that his loyal friends simply overheard him express the longing of his heart for something that would be a real encouragement to him. It is wonderful to realise that these strong warriors had enough sensitivity to see and to sense the human and spiritual need of their leader. They did not chide him for being weak, nor did they ignore him and leave him to get on with his job on his own. Without any fuss and at considerable cost and risk to themselves, they broke through the Philistine guards and brought water from the well of Bethlehem to David. There is a wealth of care, devotion and understanding in the thoughtfulness of these men and when David became aware of what they had done, just for him and for his encouragement, he was totally overwhelmed. Without hesitation David recognised that devotion so total as this was not the right of any man, not even the man anointed by God, and he gave it all to God, the God whose grace had so touched the hearts of these mighty men. This does not mean that David refused their care and love nor did he devalue it. He

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was moved to the depth of his being and he must have been wonderfully encouraged to go on in the costly work that God had called him to. The whole story reminds us of the woman in Luke 14:1-9. When the twelve disciples were all insensitive to the need of their Master, the woman ministered to Him in costly love. What a lesson'

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24:1-9

Throughout our studies we have understandably concentrated on the person of David, his anointing by God, his calling to service, and his many and varied sins and failures. But we must not think that the people of Israel were innocent and guiltless all through the story. We have read not only of Absalom and others rebelling against David but of great sections of the people siding with them and working against God's anointed leader. We are told in v.1 that God was angry with Israel because of the nation's sins and expressed his anger through David. It is easy to blame governments and leaders for the troubles of the nation or the church but the people and their leaders cannot be separated and when deep troubles come the reaction should be, 'Lord, we have sinned,' (1 Sam. 7:5; Dan. 9:3-6ff). Many accept that God acts to bring judgment and rebuke on pagan nations but many refuse to see that God judges His own people, whether Israel or the church. Indeed judgment must often begin with the church so that she may become light and salt to the nation (1 Pet. 4:17). This means that times come when the people of God have to live with the situations their own moral and spiritual failure have brought to pass. It is not a case of rebelling against or resenting the situation, or even acting swiftly to seek to change it, but rather a humbling of ourselves under God's mighty hand of rebuke so that in due time, when the lessons have been learned and the grace of repentance operates, the church and the nation may be again lifted up. It is a practical fact of life that we have God to deal with, and He is always totally aware of the current situation and how it has come about (Gen. 18:20-21).

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24:1-9

The first word 'again' signifies that this was not the first time God had had cause to be angry with His people. This reminds us that God is in fact slow to anger and bears long with individuals and nations, believers and unbelievers alike, in order that they might come to repentance and change of heart and life (Rom. 2:1-5; 2 Pet. 3:9). We are told that it was God who incited, stirred up, or gave the idea to David to carry out a military census. This could make us think that God was the author of something sinful. But God cannot be tempted to evil nor is He ever party to evil, since He has no need of anything sinful to cause His will to be done (Jas. 1:13-15). We need to turn to 1 Chron. 21:1 where the Chronicler, giving his spiritual overview of the history of David, says that it was Satan who initiated the temptation and that the attack was initially against David himself. We are into the realm of the interaction of good and evil. Behind human actions there is the work of Satan, whether he is immediately evident or not, but over all the activity of Satan there is the limiting power and decision of God. We may be baffled by such thoughts because we feel so vulnerable in the face of evil, but we must never think God is hard pressed. even by Satan at his fiercest. Nor must we ever think there is unrighteousness with God. His character is perfect, as are His purposes and methods. When we take time to think, it is comforting that Satan is so specifically restricted (Job 1:9-12; 2.3-6). Here in Samuel, God's action is against Israel and David is the instrument. In Chronicles David is the target for the enemy. We have to accept that in some way, deliberately or unwittingly, both the king and the people had given opportunity to Satan. How we need to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41; 1 Pet. 2:11).

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24:1-9

Following on the last comment in yesterday's reading we need to consider further God's dealings with us. Sometimes, in order to be delivered from evil and to be compelled to take the Devil seriously, we may be led into temptation. It is not so much shock tactics as radical treatment, and later in the chapter we shall see David very wide awake spiritually, with a devastating awareness of what he had done, and apparently taking full responsibility for the disaster that had befallen his people (14). We cannot exonerate Israel in view of v.1, even though we are not clear as to the exact complaint God had against His people. It does seem that David's sin was

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one of worldly arrogance, counting the people, no doubt to confirm to himself and to others what a successful leader he had been. What a warning this is to our generation that is so obsessed with church growth in terms of statistical increase! Do we no longer consider the story of Gideon and its lesson on how God had to reduce the army radically in order that He might be able to work a resounding victory to His glory (Judges 7:1-8)? In our story even Joab, not always saintly in his attitudes and actions, saw the folly of David's plan and made plain that God does not need numbers (3). David insisted, and he was totally wrong in his attitude. Now this was the sin, not of a novice, but of a man of spiritual maturity, with proven service, at the climax of his service, and about to hand on the work to the next generation. What a warning to all of us who think we are now secure (1 Cor. 10:11-13)! We must see quite clearly the activity of both God and Satan, and see also their objectives. Satan was out to humiliate and destroy the leader, the people and the work. God was working to save them all. David, the man who had failed so often but who had been brought through by God's grace, seems to have grown proud of his achievements. His thinking was clouded and, like Peter many years later, Satan had desired to have him, but God was determined to hold him (Lk. 22:24-34).

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24:10-14

Keep in mind that for nearly ten months the attention of David personally and the energy of Israel's executive officers had been concentrated on carrying out a work that was unnecessary, irrelevant, unproductive and displeasing to God. David had been told by Joab (3) that it belonged to God and to God alone to grant whatever increase He pleased, great or small. But David had been quite sure that he, the spiritual man, knew the mind of God and he persisted in the plan to number the people. It seems that only after all the statistics had been gathered in, only after all the energy had been expended and the work done so that it could not be undone, that David's conscience smote him. Note that the conviction came before the prophet was sent to speak to David and, in a sense, the prophet's message was something of a relief because David then knew exactly what he had to cope with. But we must not fail to note that as soon as David was convicted of his sin he went right to God with his confession (10). Without doubt he was convicted by the Holy Spirit and he made no attempt to stifle that conviction. He made no excuses for his earlier stubborn persistence in numbering the people. He saw where and when he had gone wrong, not least in refusing to listen to those who counselled him. There was no self-pity in David regarding his predicament and he did not ask plaintively why God had not stopped him. David had been determined to do his own will and God granted his desire. In the realm of guidance and making decisions, people sometimes say that if what they are doing is wrong God will close the door. He may do so, to frustrate and prevent their plan. But God did not stop David until the stage was reached that there were solemn consequences to live with. God's leader was learning that his leadership, apart from on-going dependence on God, was both defective and dangerous for God's people and work.

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24:10-14

There is something solemn about David's being given the choice of the method of judgment and something deeply moving in his desire to commit himself and his people into the hand of God. The choice given to David is recorded slightly differently in 1 Chron. 21: 10-13 and makes clear that the third option was David's choice not because the time of discipline would be shorter but because the discipline would be directly from the hand of God. The devastation of three years' famine would affect the land and the people far longer than just the years of crop failure, and memories of the last famine may have been much in David's mind (21:1). Three months' defeat by enemy nations would also leave a legacy of confusion, disintegration and demoralisation which could take a long time to reinstate. God's direct chastisement would not be easier to bear, except in the sense that God's dealings would be carefully exact, neither too much or too little, too short or lasting too long. Whatever our situation may be, it is better to be in God's hand than man's, although even man's hand is limited and controlled by God. It is important to remember this, because power so easily corrupts and fallen human nature can have a lust for power. This is the pride that can lead to all sorts of complications, and it may well have been that both the nation and the king had begun to give way to pride, now that they and the work were established and had some wide reputation. Nation and king, people and leader influenced each other but not for good. According to 1 Chron. 21:7, the nation began to suffer first and it was the sight of what he had brought on

his people that brought David to repentance. Note very carefully that there is no suggestion from David that God's punishment was harsh or excessive. Perhaps David saw more clearly than we often do just how dangerous and destructive sin can be.

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24:15-17

Read also 1Chron. 21:14-17. Keep in mind that, having elected to suffer the pestilence, David and his family were as much at risk as everyone else. The king stood with his people as the angel messenger of God carried out the sentence. This was not a natural plague but a direct judgment of God in consequence of human sin. There is a great reluctance in our generation to think of any of the 'plagues' that affect society as being in any sense a judgment or a punishment from God. Granted we are warned in John 9:1-3 not to be quick to declare a clear connection between human disease or tragedy and an individual or a family's sin. Disease and death are basically the result of the Fall of Man and the ensuing disorder in the whole of creation and life. But such stories as we are reading here are spoken of as God's directed punishment on human and spiritual wrongdoing. Individuals, communities and nations sow and they reap (Gal. 6:7) and, having sown the wind, they reap the whirlwind (Hos. 8:7). The death toll in the pestilence made nonsense of David's numbering of the people, which numbering was not in fact accurate. Compare 2 Sam. 24:9 with 1 Chron. 21:5-6. We have already seen that it was God's action in chastisement that led to David's conviction and repentance. Now we see that it was God's mercy in limiting the chastisement (16) that led to David's renewed sense of responsibility for the people which caused him to be willing to 'take the rap' for them. He was willing to suffer so that the people might be spared. Do we not see a glimpse here of David's great 'son' Jesus who stood in for the people and died for them? One last thought: even in His solemn chastisement God does not really deal with us according to our sins but remembers our frailty (Ps. 103:8-14). Even when rebuke is called for, it is to restore, not to crush (Isa. 42:3).

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24:18-25

Look back to v.17 and see that David's deepest grief in his disobedience was that it had brought terrible suffering to his people. We see David in his truest light as the Shepherd King. It seems from v.17, 21, 25 that the plague was not finally ended until the place had been bought for the building of an altar to the Lord. This was to be the site for the building of the Temple in the time of Solomon, as 1 Chron. 22:1 makes plain. Araunah's threshing floor was on the top level of Mount Moriah, associated with the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22:1-8ff. Solomon's Temple on this site was destroyed at the time of the captivity in Babylon, and Herod's Temple, built later on the same site was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 (Matt. 24:1-2). On the site now, over the remains of the Temple whose stones dating from Herod's time can still be seen, there stands the Mosque of Omar, one of the most sacred shrines of Islam. At this stage in the story God was looking far into the future and laying His plans specifically. Remember from the Abraham story that it was in relation to Mount Moriah that there were spoken the words, 'The Lord will provide' (Gen.22:14). He is the God who provides both place and sacrifice (2 Chron. 3:1), and it is good when a generation of God's people recognise that they have been led to where they now are by God's grace, and that the situation they work in has foundations laid in the past by others. There is nothing indiscriminate about God's work as it goes forward. It is always going forward and if God's people do not make it their prime business to walk in step with God then there is a real possibility they will be left behind. They will not lose their salvation if they are truly believing people, but they will lose their reward (1Cor. 3:10-15).

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24:18-25

It is difficult to know to what extent David and those with him were aware of the full significance of what they were doing on the day when the negotiations for the purchase of the threshing floor were taking place. Perhaps none of us ever know, this side of Heaven, the significance of what we are doing in our service in the Gospel. This is one reason why we must see to it that, however humble or ordinary our allotted task may be, we should do it as unto the Lord. It is not for us to pass final judgment on our own work or that of others because its place in the over-all plan of God will be seen only when the work is complete. Judge nothing before the time (1 Cor.

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4:1-5). But whatever work we are called to do, we must value it with the Lord's valuation and we must give to it our best commitment. This seems to be David's attitude in v.24, in words similar to what is printed on many church offering envelopes. Even though the context of this whole story is God's rebuke of and judgment on the sins of His people, David was aware of just how much his whole life and service depended on God's wonderful grace, mercy and pardon. And it was in response to God's mercies that he gave himself without reserve. Think of the words of the missionary C.T. Studd, 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him.' Paul speaks in the same way in Romans 12:1-2. So did Isaac Watts in the hymn:

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.'

David knew by now that all he was, all he had, all he had been able to do were all the work of God's grace. In a very real sense he was simply giving back to God what God had given him. That tends to make us think of the 'sacrifice' of Christian life and service in a different way.

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