

THE STORY OF THE BIBLE

VOLUME FIVE

Herbert W. Armstrong led the Worldwide Church of God (formerly The Radio Church of God until 1968) until his death in 1986. Hundreds of millions heard his voice and read his literature. God called him in the fall of 1926 and he was converted in the spring of 1927. Over the course of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, God revealed through him a great many true biblical doctrines, which had been lost to the Church through the centuries. After his death, his successors ceased to believe and teach these doctrines. Although copyright law prohibits The Restored Church of God from reproducing and distributing literature produced while he led the Worldwide Church of God, we are committed to the preservation and teaching of all of these truths!

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INTRODUCTION

by David C. Pack

This is the fifth volume of a special series. These books truly represent “THE STORY OF THE BIBLE.” Many have attempted to write various kinds of “Bible Story Books,” but they are usually written only for children, and are primarily designed to entertain instead of *educate* or *inspire*. The reader will see that the wonderful style and artwork of this series capture the spirit of God’s Word, with its intended lessons and vital meaning.

Most children’s versions of the Bible terribly misrepresent important stories that it contains—and they are written with wrong emphasis—and wrong *meaning*! Instead of leading children to the true God, and to the true doctrines of His Word, children are left with the impression that the Bible only contains a *few* stories, and is mostly a book about war, violence, blood, thunder and death.

This is terribly wrong!

In keeping with the modern generation’s obsession with graphic violence, most efforts to reflect the teachings of the Bible “play” to this interest. Youth are given what they *want* to read, not what they *need* to understand. The many stories of the Bible are intended to teach VITAL LESSONS to people of *all* ages. Modern writers miss the mark when they *cater to* children, rather than properly *teach* them what God intends.

If young people learn the Bible in a *wrong* way—with emphasis on the *wrong* things, while ignoring the enormous number of lessons that the Bible contains—at least two bad things result.

First, all these wrong concepts and approaches must be unlearned and replaced by right knowledge and understanding of what the Bible *really* says. Unlearning error is a most difficult thing to do, and is actually far harder than learning the truth correctly the first time, leaving no need to sweep the mind clean of what has been wrong or misunderstood.

Second, young people will later find the stories of the Bible have been trivialized and made irrelevant, and they may find themselves turned off by its message rather than being excited and thrilled about what they are learning.

The modern system of education is morally and spiritually bankrupt! Deluded educators have been biased against God and His Word by the atheistic teaching of evolution poured into them from childhood. They have taught young people for decades that there are “no absolutes” and that they must follow “situation ethics.” They have led the world into a kind of secular human-

ism—where people are driven by how they *feel* rather than clear definitions of *right* and *wrong*! But there is right and wrong in life—and those who are teaching the children of this world have cut themselves off from this knowledge (Isaiah 59:1-2). They cannot teach what they were never taught!

Also, this world's churches keep young people steeped in traditional pagan philosophies and teachings that have deceived the world for millennia. They have ignored the great spiritual principle of CAUSE and EFFECT that governs *every* aspect of life. They have neglected to teach true *spiritual* values. They have defaulted their responsibility in all the critical areas of leadership—and have utterly failed in their greatest responsibility, which should have been to instill in young minds the marvelous truths of God's Word—to teach youth how to live, not just how to earn a living.

This is a tragic state of affairs!

Many who attempt to study the Bible become confused, frustrated and disillusioned, believing that it is too difficult to understand. As a result, many who *would* seek to teach their children true Christian standards and values, either give up altogether or leave such education to the *many* theological “experts,” who offer no end of differing—and conflicting—views.

Such an approach only serves to further confuse young people about the Bible, thus, in many cases, alienating them from it. But those who truly seek to understand God's Word, without adding their own interpretation (II Peter 1:20), will find that there *is* simplicity in it (II Corinthians 11:3).

Children need to be taught this simplicity! They need to know who and what they are—and why they were born—that they are future sons of God in the making!

You were born for a *reason*. Your life has a SUPREME PURPOSE! The Bible reveals how to be in harmony with the true God—and His purpose for life. The world is ignorant of this. So are most parents. They have no idea how or what to teach their children. No one is guiding parents, because no one knows *how* to guide them. Sadly, though the Bible is a gripping, interesting—even *fascinating*—book of true stories (all part of one great story), most find it dull, dry and boring.

This series is written to completely change this misconception in the minds of people of all ages! It uses language designed to expand your mind through the use of word pictures. Our goal has been to make the Bible *real*—to make it talk directly to parents and children. With only a little explanation, parents will be able to read these volumes to children as young as age three.

In today's world, youth are universally misguided, abused, neglected and ignored and this fuels a variety of rampant, escalating social problems. This is because society as a whole has rejected the SOURCE of true happiness, success, peace and fulfillment—GOD'S WORD. As King Solomon admonished, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

How many are even *attempting* to do this today?

Many true doctrines of God were restored to His Church in the middle of the 20th century. By the 1990s, they had largely been discarded by its new leaders. Part of our commission is to once again “restore what was restored” and to

continue to “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). The Restored Church of God *has* completely restored *all* God’s doctrines to the Church!

Under the faithful leadership of Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), various Church youth programs were established as part of the fulfillment of this important responsibility. These included the Y.O.U. program (Youth Opportunities United—for teens), and the Y.E.S. program (Youth Educational Services—for young children). There was also a *Summer Educational Program* (S.E.P.), providing teenagers with the opportunity to fellowship with other teens and develop many skills and talents in a camp environment.

There was also much youth-oriented *literature*, offered to the young people of God’s Church. These included a *Youth* magazine for teenagers, *Youth Bible Lessons* for children from kindergarten through sixth grade—and *The Bible Story* series.

Children are far too precious to ignore or neglect. While parents *must utilize* the tools that are available to them, they cannot do this if these tools have not been created.

As the only true extension of Mr. Armstrong’s ministry, The Restored Church of God is re-creating these same written tools—as well as the magazines, books, booklets, articles and letters that once taught the full truth of God to millions around the world.

This series is being rewritten—with new volumes to appear on a regular basis—to once again make the Bible *simple*, so that the stories in it come to life! But these volumes are *not* just for children! It is our hope that parents and children alike will enjoy and benefit from them. Its forerunner was a six-volume work, once described as “written for children 5 to 105.” The original series is no longer available—but this new one is!

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

MICAH HIRES A PRIEST

Our story thus far: During the era of the judges, the people of Israel drifted away from God and His laws. Instead of relying on the Eternal to show them the right way to live, every man did what seemed right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). This led to constant trouble, grief and misery for the nation of Israel.

With each generation, the Israelites became more and more like the pagan nations God had warned His people not to copy. Selfishness and corruption had spread throughout the Promised Land, accompanied by idolatry and superstition.

A Wrong Way to Worship God

Living in the mountains of Ephraim was a superstitious woman who discovered that her silver had been mysteriously stolen—all 1,100 pieces of it. This upset her so much that she pronounced a curse on the unknown thief.

The woman's son, Micah, heard her prayer and began to worry, for it was he who was the thief. Driven by fear, Micah approached his mother and said, "Do you remember those 1,100 pieces of silver that were stolen from you?"

"Of course I do," she said. "I put a curse on the thief who stole them from me, whoever he is."

"Yes. I overheard you when you pronounced the curse. Well, I'm the one who took your silver."

Not wanting her son to suffer from the curse, Micah's mother said, "I pray that God will bless you, my son."

Then Micah returned the stolen money.

Pleased, his mother said, "I had planned to dedicate this silver to honor the Eternal on your behalf." So she took 200 pieces of the silver and paid a silversmith to make a carved image and a molten image—idols—for her son.

Micah's mother may have had good intentions, but she was breaking God's laws. Over the last 6,000 years, carnal-minded people have used their human reasoning to think of manmade ways to serve and

worship God. But God wants His people to worship Him *His* way, according to *His* laws, judgments and statues—and not with idols.

When the images were finished, Micah used them to set up a shrine (a private place of worship) in his home, also making an ephod and household idols for his shrine. He even set apart one of his sons to be his priest!

Back in the days of Moses, when Israel was wandering in the wilderness, God commanded that an ephod be made for His high priest. The ephod was a sleeveless vestment of gold, blue, purple and scarlet, and made with fine linen. Twelve precious stones were embedded in its breastplate; these represented the 12 tribes of Israel. The ephod was to be worn by the high priest in officially serving God. It was not for private use, as in Micah's case.

Micah was pleased with himself. "Now we no longer need to travel all the way to Shiloh," he thought, "to worship at God's tabernacle. We have our own tabernacle right here!"

Micah's personal shrine was a counterfeit of God's holy tabernacle, which was at Shiloh. Only God had the authority to establish tabernacles, temples and other holy places. And only He had the right to set up priests.

Like most of the Israelites of his day, Micah did not pay close attention to the details of God's laws and teachings. He thought that his own personal way of worshipping God—including using idols—was good enough.

But Micah was mistaken. The Eternal only accepts those who obey Him *His* way (Judges 17:1-5).

Like everyone else in the land, Micah acted as his own king, or leader of authority. No one could tell him what to do.

An Ungodly Arrangement

One day a young Levite named Jonathan departed from Bethlehem, which was in the territory of Judah, and looked for a suitable place that would hire his priestly services. Rather than serving Israel from one of the 48 cities God had given the tribe of Levi, Jonathan wanted to seek his own fortune. He looked out only for himself.

The young man's journey eventually led him to Micah's house. When Micah learned that Jonathan was a Levite, he said, "Why not stay here with me? You can serve me as my own priest and tell me what God wants me to do. Every year I will pay you ten pieces of silver and one complete set of clothes. I'll also provide all your food."

Jonathan thought to himself, "This sounds like a great deal. Free



Micah presents Jonathan with an intriguing proposition.

food and clothes, plus money, too.”

So the young Levite agreed, selling his services to be Micah’s private priest—which no man has the authority to do. Even today, there are men who claim to be ministers of God, who hire themselves out from church to church, serving the wants of men.

Micah was excited. He smiled, and clapped his hand, saying, “Now that I have a Levite as my priest, I know that God will favor me.” Micah deceived himself into believing that he could gain God’s approval his own way rather than God’s way.

Jonathan moved into his new home, and Micah treated him like one of his own sons (Judges 17:7-13).

The Troubles of Dan

Meanwhile, the tribe of Dan was looking for a land in which to live. Though the other Israelite tribes had territories, the people of Dan failed to rely upon God’s power to conquer their allotted portion of the Promised Land. The fierce, war-like Amorites had driven the Danites up into the mountains. Eventually, Dan gave up fighting for their inheritance, which was the western end of a strip of land between Judah and Ephraim. So the Danites began to look for a new, easier territory to conquer and colonize.

Dan sent five men of valor to spy out the land. From Zorah and Eshtaol, these men eventually came to the mountains of Ephraim, where they met Micah. Confident that God was with him, Micah said to the five Danites, “You men have traveled far—you must be hungry and tired. Come, stay the night in my home in peace and safety.”

The men eagerly agreed.

That night, when they heard Jonathan’s voice, the Danites recognized from his accent that the young man was not from Ephraim.

Privately, they asked him, “Where do you come from? What are you doing here in Ephraim? Who brought you here?”

Jonathan explained that Micah had hired him to be his priest. Then he told them, “Micah treats me extremely well, like I was one of his sons.”

The Danites said to him, “Please talk to God for us and ask Him if our mission will be a success.”

“Go in peace,” the young priest answered. “Do not worry. God is with you. He is pleased with what you are doing.” Jonathan gave these men the answer they wanted to hear. In doing so, Jonathan misused God’s name to give his message authority.

Greatly encouraged, the five men departed the next day. Their jour-

ney took them up north, to the town of Laish, which was located in a valley controlled by the town of Beth-Rehob. Laish was a prosperous colony that was blessed to have fertile land and no enemies. Its people were colonists from the land of Sidon. Even though Sidon was too far away to protect them, the people of Laish did not bother to protect their secluded town with walls, for they all lived in safety and peace, without cruel overlords to oppress them. And, unlike other towns and villages, the leaders of Laish never asked the nearby towns to help them in case of an attack.

The five men of Dan spied out Laish from a safe distance, and concluded that their tribe could easily take over the town. “This place is perfect for us,” they said among themselves. “This is truly a blessing from God—just as that Levite said!”

So they hurried back to Zorah and Eshtaol, and told their kinsmen and fellow Danites what they had discovered.

“Everyone, arise! Let’s go!” the five men said. “We’ve seen the land that God wants us to conquer—and it’s very good land, with enough room for us all. It has everything we will ever need. What are you waiting for? Let’s attack and take it.”

One soldier said, “Hold on. What about the people there? Will they put up much of a fight?”

“No,” they answered. “The people of Laish think they’re safe, that they don’t need protection. They haven’t even bothered to protect their town behind a walled defense. Clearly, God is giving the land to us!”

Excited and filled with anticipation, 600 Danite warriors armed themselves with weapons and departed for Laish, bringing along their families (Judges 18:1-11).

Jonathan Sells Out

On the way to Laish, the Danites camped near Kiriath-Jearim, in the territory of Judah. Afterward, they marched up into the mountains of Ephraim.

When they drew near to Micah’s house, the five men who had been spies asked their fellow soldiers, “Did you know that someone in this village has a private shrine, along with several idols and a sacred ephod? What should we do about this?”

The 600 warriors said, “Perhaps we can put these to our own use.” Then they left the road and went to Micah’s house. The five men who had been there before went inside and took Micah’s ephod and household idols. Meanwhile, the other warriors stood guard at the gate.

When Jonathan the Levite priest saw what was happening, he



shouted, “Hold on there! What are you doing?”

The men said, “Quiet! Keep your mouth shut and listen. Why not come with us and be our priest, so you can tell us what God wants us to do? Why stay here and be a priest for just one man’s family when you can be the priest for a clan—or even a whole tribe of Israel?”

Jonathan liked their idea. It appealed to his lust for power and authority. So he helped the men of Dan steal Micah’s tools of idol worship. Once again, Jonathan had sold his services to the highest bidder.

When Micah, who had been away, finally returned home, he was shocked to discover that his priest and tools of idolatry were missing. He quickly gathered his neighbors to help him get his things back.

Then Micah and his neighbors rode out after the thieves. They soon caught up with the people of Dan and shouted for them to stop.

The Danite warriors turned to face Micah and said, “What’s wrong? What is so important that you felt the need to bring all these men with you?”

Micah answered, “You know why I’m here. You stole my household idols, which were specially made for me. And you took my priest, too. I don’t have anything left!”

“Don’t raise your voice at us. We don’t want to hear any more about it,” the leaders of Dan said. “And you better not make us angry, or you will get yourself and your family killed!”

Then the leaders ordered the tribe to continue their journey. Micah was outnumbered and he knew it. He realized that he did not have enough men to stop them. As the tribe of Dan marched off into the distance, Micah and his neighbors stood by helplessly and watched. And then, reluctantly, Micah and his men returned home empty-handed (Judges 18:12-26).

The City of Dan

The tribe of Dan, along with Jonathan, continued their march until they finally came to the defenseless town of Laish. With lightning speed, the warriors of Dan made a surprise attack on the unsuspecting townspeople, killing everyone they could find and burning everything to the ground.

The tribe of Dan then rebuilt the town and settled in it, calling their new home Dan, which became the northernmost point of Israel. (Throughout their history, the people of Dan usually named their surroundings—rivers, towns, regions, etc.—after themselves. The Danube River and the country of Denmark are just two of many examples.)

Since God's holy tabernacle was way down south in Shiloh, the Danites reasoned that it was too far to offer sacrifices to God there. So they used the idols and other pagan tools they had stolen from Micah and set up their own place of worship. They even set apart Jonathan to be their high priest—which God did not give them the authority to do!

Of all those who were involved in this sin, Jonathan knew better. Not only was he born and raised as a Levite—which meant that he knew what God expected from him and His people—Jonathan also was the grandson of Moses! (In the King James Version of the Bible, the oldest translation of God's Word, Judges 18:30 records that Jonathan was the grandson of "Manasseh." However, this was changed many centuries ago by the people who originally copied the Bible by hand. They changed Moses' name to Manasseh in that verse in order to honor Moses and distance him from the disgraceful actions of his grandson.)

Jonathan proved to be the opposite of his famous grandfather—selfish, covetousness and deceitful. Had he truly cared about the Danites, he would have refused to be their high priest, and he would have taught them God's ways.

Jonathan and his descendants served as priests for the tribe of Dan, causing them to serve idols for many generations (verses 27-31).

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

ISRAEL'S CIVIL WAR

A certain Levite who lived deep in the mountains of Ephraim took for himself a concubine. They lived together like husbands and wives do, but they were not married. This was a sin against God. Like all Levites, this man had been raised from birth to know God's laws and to teach them to Israel. But, like the majority of the people of Israel, this Levite was not concerned with following God with all his heart and soul.

As a result, the man lacked God's wisdom. Not only did he get into a sinful, unmarried relationship with a woman, but his concubine was also a harlot—an unfaithful woman who betrayed her lover by having sinful, marriage-like relations with other men.

Upon discovering this, the Levite became so angry that the woman fearfully ran back home to live with her father in Bethlehem.

After four months had passed, the Levite missed her so much that he decided to go to Bethlehem. He thought to himself, "Perhaps I can convince her to come back home with me." So the Levite and his servant took two donkeys and headed for Bethlehem.

The Levite soon found that his concubine was so happy to see him that she invited him into her family's home.

Even her father was glad to see the Levite, wanting him and his daughter to reconcile. Every time the Levite was ready to head back home, the father convinced him to stay; he did not want him to leave. So the Levite stayed with them for three days, feasting with the woman's father.

By the fifth day, the Levite, the concubine and his servant got up early to leave. But the woman's father said, "Stay, eat, so you can keep up your strength. Why go now when you can leave right after lunch?"

Convinced once again, the Levite stayed, eating and drinking and having a merry time well past lunch.

Finally, when the Levite got up to leave for home, the woman's father said, "Please stay. It's already late afternoon. If you leave now, you won't get very far before night comes. Stay with us one more night and enjoy yourself. You can always leave early tomorrow morning."

Though he knew that the man was right, the Levite was determined

to get back home without further delay. So he had his servant saddle the donkeys, then the Levite, the woman and his servant departed Bethlehem, and headed for the mountains of Ephraim (Judges 19:1-10).

Finding a Place to Spend the Night

By the time sunset drew near and the sky began to get dark, the Levite and his party only managed to travel as far as Jebus. (The Israelites used to call it Jerusalem, but the city had been seized by the Jebusites, who now controlled it.) In those days, there were no paved superhighways or streetlamps to safely guide travelers to their destination. Traveling in the dark was dangerous.

As they came near the city, which was only a few miles from Bethlehem, the servant of the Levite said, “Let’s stop and spend the night in this town.”



But his master said, “No. The people of Jebus aren’t Israelites. We wouldn’t be safe among these foreigners. We’ll move on and spend the night at Gibeah. We can make it to there or maybe even to Ramah before nightfall. Either way, we’ll be safe among fellow Israelites.”

So they traveled farther, until finally, just after sunset, they reached Gibeah, which was in the territory that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin.

They entered the Benjamite town and tried to find a safe place to lodge for the night, but all of the innkeepers and town residents turned

them away. “We have nothing available,” they said to the Levite. “You’ll have to find another place to sleep.”

Since no one would have mercy on them and take them in, the three travelers sat down in the open square just inside the town gates.

Shortly, an old man entered through Gibeah’s gates; he was on his way home after having worked all day in the fields. Like the Levite, the old man had been born and raised in the mountains of Ephraim, though he now lived in Gibeah among Benjamites.

When he noticed the three travelers sitting in the open square, he began to worry about them. He knew that it was not safe to stay out in the open at night, for too many wicked men roamed the town after dark, preying upon the weak and defenseless.

“Where are you going?” the old man asked the Levite. “Where did you come from? Are you travelers?”

“We’re just passing through. We came from Bethlehem in Judah,” the Levite answered. “We went there on a visit. We plan on going to God’s holy tabernacle, and then we will return to our home in the mountains of Ephraim.”

“Really?” asked the old man, surprised. He was glad to meet someone from his home region.

“Yes. But we have no place to spend the night. No one here will help us. We brought food for our donkeys and bread and wine for ourselves—we don’t need anything else except a place to sleep.”

The old man said, “You are more than welcome to be guests in my home for the night. Whatever you do, don’t stay out here—it isn’t safe!”

The Levite accepted his invitation. The old man brought his guests into his house and showered them with warm hospitality. He fed their donkeys, had his guests’ feet washed, and served them a hearty meal (Judges 19:11-21).

Wickedness in Gibeah

As the old man and his guests feasted and enjoyed themselves, a gang of wicked men surrounded the house and started banging on the door. The Bible calls them “sons of Belial,” meaning that, as human tools of Satan the devil, these worthless men had cast off the yoke of decency and sold themselves to do evil.

The gang of wicked men shouted, “Old man, we know that a stranger came to your house tonight. Send him out, so we can abuse him!”

All laughter and smiles stopped. Beads of sweat began to drip down the old man’s forehead. The Levite began to worry.

The old man said to him, “I’ll take care of this,” and went outside to speak to the gang.

“My friends,” he said, “I beg you, please don’t commit such a horrible sin against this man. He is a guest in my home. I must see to his safety. If you want someone to abuse, let me send out my daughter instead. She is unmarried, and has never been with a man. If that is not enough, I’ll even send out this man’s concubine wife. You can abuse them or do whatever else you want, but please don’t do such a horrible sin against my guest.”

According to the custom of the times, the old man was supposed to defend his guests. However, because Israel had forgotten the one true God, even when people tried to do the right thing, they ended up doing it the wrong way. Without relying on God and living according to His ways, people did what seemed right in their own eyes. This *always* leads to suffering, misery—and even death.

The gang refused to listen to the old man.

The Levite, selfishly fearing more for his safety than for the safety of the woman he claimed to love, grabbed his concubine and shoved her outside! She went kicking and screaming, but the cowardly Levite cared only about himself.

All that night, the men abused and mistreated the concubine, while the Levite cowered in safety. Despite her screams for help, no one came to her rescue.

Finally, just before sunrise, the evil men let the woman go. She stumbled back to the house where the Levite had spent the night, and collapsed at the door.

Early that morning, the Levite woke up and got ready to leave. He opened the front door and found his concubine lying on the ground with her hands on the doorstep.

“Get up!” he ordered. “It’s time to leave.”

But she did not move. The concubine was dead.

Quietly, the Levite lifted her lifeless body, which was bloody and bruised, onto his donkey and departed for home.

Once he reached home, the Levite took a large knife and cut the woman’s body into 12 pieces, from limb to limb. Then he ordered messengers to take one piece to each tribe of Israel.

He said, “Tell my fellow Israelites about the wickedness that the men of Gibeah did to my concubine. Then ask them if such evil like this has ever happened since Israel left Egypt. Tell them to think about it, talk it over, and decide what should be done.”

Of course, the Levite failed to mention that he had acted like a coward and failed to protect the woman he supposedly loved.

The Levite's plan was to get revenge on Gibeah, and, perhaps ease his conscience for failing to rescue the concubine. He reasoned that her body parts and his message would cause the rest of Israel to get angry over what had happened, and to desire revenge (Judges 19:22-19).

Seeking Revenge

The Levite's plan was working. All who received the body parts and message, or who had only heard about it, were outraged. All throughout the land of Israel, the people said, "This is horrible! Nothing like this has ever happened since the day Israel left Egypt" (Judges 19:30).

A national assembly of Israelite troops—from Dan up north, to Beersheba down south, as well as those from Gilead (except for the town of Jabesh) from the other side of the Jordan River—gathered at Mizpah. The 400,000 warriors had one purpose: Revenge!

Meanwhile, news about the meeting at Mizpah reached the tribe of Benjamin.

The generals met with the Levite and asked, "How could such a horrible thing happen?"

The man answered, "My concubine and I went into the town of Gibeah to spend the night there. Later that night, a gang of wicked Gibeah men surrounded the house. These Benjamites planned to kill me, but instead they abused the woman so much she died. I could not believe that fellow Israelites could be so cruel to one of their own countrymen. So I cut up her body into 12 pieces and sent them throughout Israel. You represent the people of Israel—you must decide what should be done about the men of Gibeah."

Once again, the Levite left out the fact that he had dragged his concubine out of the house, throwing her to her doom.

All the leaders agreed as one man: "None of us will go home. Each tribe shall send one tenth of its men to bring back food for the army. The men of Gibeah deserve to be punished for this sin. Therefore, we will ask God which should attack first."

The leaders of Israel sent messengers to every town and village in Benjamin, and gave them this message: "How could wickedness occur among you? We cannot allow such a terrible crime to go unpunished. We must remove this evil from Israel. Deliver these evil sons of Belial over to us, and we will put them to death!"

But the people of Benjamin refused. Even though they were vastly outnumbered, the hearts of the Benjamites were hardened against jus-

tice and decency. They refused to yield to what was right. By not giving up the gang of men from Gibeah, Benjamin, in effect, was saying, “We stand by their wickedness.”

So the towns and villages all over Benjamin’s territory gathered its troops, who marched to Gibeah. Among them were 700 left-handed warriors who were experts at slinging rocks at small targets—they never missed! From within the city’s walls, they could kill attackers without ever being touched. With Gibeah’s 700 warriors, Benjamin had 26,700 troops to fight against Israel’s 400,000 revenge-seeking soldiers (Judges 20:1-17).

Self-righteous Israel

Through Phinehas the high priest, the leaders of Israel’s army asked God, “Which tribe should be the first to attack Benjamin?”

God answered, “Judah shall go first.” Though God told them who should attack first, Israel did not ask Him if it was His will that they attack Benjamin. Israel was being self-righteous. Instead of asking God about what they should do, they took matters into their own hands. They decided for themselves the right thing to do.

The next morning, the army moved and encamped near Gibeah. Then the warriors of Judah—the best of Israel’s fighting men—departed for the battlefield.

Suddenly, Benjamin’s soldiers rushed out of Gibeah and attacked. When the day was over, 22,000 Israelite soldiers had been cut down!

Surprised by their humiliating defeat, Israel’s army regrouped and prepared to do battle the next day. They were encouraged because this time they sought God’s counsel with tears of sorrow. They had asked Him, through the high priest, “Should we attack the people of Benjamin again, even though they are our fellow Israelites?”

“Yes,” God replied, “attack them again!”

Greatly encouraged, Israel set out to attack Gibeah. But Benjamin’s soldiers rushed out of the town and attacked—another 18,000 Israelite soldiers lay dead on the battlefield!

Clearly, something was wrong. God was not giving Israel the victory.

This was because the Israelites were still relying on their own strength. They thought they would succeed because their cause was right and they vastly outnumbered Benjamin’s troops. But God gives victory to those who put Him first, who serve *His* will—not their own.

This time, all of Israel humbled themselves with prayer and fasting—denying themselves food and drink in order to truly seek God and to help them recognize that they desperately needed Him. At about sunset, they

offered burnt offerings and peace offerings to God before the Ark of the Covenant, which represented His throne, the seat of God's supreme authority. The Israelites truly wanted to please God and ask for His blessing.

When their fast had ended, Phinehas the high priest prayed, "O Eternal, the people of Benjamin are fellow Israelites. Should we stop fighting or should we attack them again? Please tell us Your will."

God answered, "Attack! Tomorrow, I will deliver them into your hand."

Immediately, Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah, secretly surrounding the town. The next day, Israel attacked.

Overconfident from their previous victories, the Benjamites rushed out as before. The Israelites pretended to run away, like Joshua and his men had done years earlier at the city of Ai, drawing their attackers away from Gibeah. About thirty Israelites were slain. Their quick deaths caused the warriors of Benjamin to gleefully boast, "We're defeating them just like we did before!"

The fleeing Israelites headed for Baal-Tamar, where they regrouped. Meanwhile, 10,000 of Israel's best soldiers, who were hiding west of Gibeah, arose and made a surprise attack on the town gates. They rushed in and captured Gibeah, killing everyone within. Then they set the town on fire, using the smoke as a signal for the fleeing Israelite troops to turn around and attack the Benjamite soldiers.

In the chaos of heavy fighting, the Benjamite warriors saw clouds of smoke rising coming from Gibeah and realized that the town, their only safe haven, was ablaze. Then the soldiers they had been pursuing suddenly began to attack! Frightened out of their minds, the Benjamites panicked, for they knew that they had no place to run to. Cut off from Gibeah's protection, they ran for the countryside. But the Israelites chased them down and overtook them. Many tried to escape, but the Israelites stayed right behind them, keeping up the attack. And they were even joined by men from nearby towns, who helped kill Benjamin's fleeing troops. About 25,000 Benjamites were killed that day.

In the horrible aftermath of Israel's civil war, about 26,100 Benjamite warriors had been slain. Yet, 600 soldiers did manage to escape into the wilderness. As they raced to find a safe place to regroup, they thought about the victory God had given to their fellow Israelites. They made it to Rimmon Rock, where they stayed for four months.

Meanwhile, the Israelites turned back and killed all the Benjamites they could find, setting ablaze all of Benjamin's towns and villages, and destroying their animals as well. The 600 Benjamites hiding at Rimmon Rock were the last of their tribe (Judges 20:18-48).

Finding Wives for Benjamin

At Mizpah, the leaders of Israel had taken an oath. They swore to never allow any of Israel's daughters to marry survivors of Benjamin. However, they soon learned that the tribe of Benjamin had been nearly wiped out. If something was not done soon, Israel would be missing an entire tribe.

When the people realized this, they all wept, and cried out to God. In their prayers they said, "How could this have happened, Eternal God?"

It happened because Israel had taken their revenge too far.

And now Israel had a serious problem: They did not want the tribe of Benjamin to die out, but they could not break their oath and allow their daughters to marry Benjamin's survivors.

Early the next morning, the Israelites built an altar and offered sacrifices to please God and to ask His blessing.

Then they asked each other, "We need to get wives for our brother Benjamites so that their tribe won't be erased. Were there any Israelite tribes who stayed away from the meeting at Mizpah and did not take the oath with us?"

After asking around, they discovered that no one had come from the clan of Jabesh Gilead, which was across the Jordan River. Before the civil war began, Israel swore to destroy any among them who did not join their cause. Since the soldiers of Jabesh Gilead did not assist their fellow Israelites, they were counted worthy of death.

So Israel sent 12,000 warriors to attack Jabesh Gilead. Their orders were to kill every man, woman and child. But they were told to spare the lives of young female virgins, those who had never married nor had marriage-like relations with other men.

The 12,000 soldiers carried out their orders, destroying Jabesh Gilead and its people. And they brought back 400 young virgins—400 wives for Benjamin (Judges 21:1-12).

Suffering From Their Own Foolishness

The Israelites sent messengers to the 600 surviving Benjamites at Rimmon Rock, telling them, "We want to make peace with you. We don't want your tribe to die out."

Naturally, the Benjamites were suspicious, but they soon realized that Israel was serious when they received 400 young virgins to marry.

However, there weren't enough women. There were still 200 men

who needed to get married and start families. Again, Israel grieved for Benjamin.

So the elders of Israel came up with a plan: “We cannot give Benjamin our daughters to marry, else we break our oath and be cursed. But what if we provide a way for the Benjamites to *take* brides for themselves?”

They told the Benjamites to lie in wait at Shiloh, where a holy festival was taking place (this may have been the Feast of Tabernacles). During the festival, it was customary for the daughters of Shiloh to come out and perform dances.

The 200 Benjamites hid in the vineyards and watched. When the daughters separated from the festival crowds to dance, the Benjamites rushed out and grabbed the young women, taking them home to be their wives—just as the elders of Israel had planned.

When the fathers and brothers of these women complained, the elders said to them, “Be kind to Benjamin. Their tribe must not die out. Besides, it’s not as though you broke your oath and gave your daughters away; you won’t be under a curse. This is best for all Israel.”

Having taken enough wives to begin new families, the men of Benjamin went back home and rebuilt their towns and villages. And, satisfied with themselves, Israel’s massive army disbanded, each tribe going back to their own territory.

Not once did Israel seek God in solving Benjamin’s problem. Every man decided to do what seemed right in his own eyes. As you can see, people who do not respect God’s government or obey His righteous laws suffer from their own foolishness (Judges 21:13-25).



CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

THE STORY OF RUTH

Now it came to pass that, during the days when God used judges to lead His people, there was a famine in the land. A man named Elimelech, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem, which was about six miles south of Jerusalem, went to sojourn (or temporarily live) in Moab. He took with him his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

After some time of living in Moab and settling in among the people there, Elimelech died. Because their father was no longer alive to properly guide them, Mahlon married Ruth, whose name means “friendship,” while Chilion married Orpah—they were both foreign Moabite women. The family continued to dwell in Moab about another ten years.

And then Mahlon and Chilion died. Naomi, their mother, was now alone; she no longer had any living blood relatives in Moab. The weight of being alone grew heavy upon her until, one day, she decided to return to her homeland.

Naomi explained this to her daughters-in-law, adding, “I’ve heard reports that the Eternal has removed the famine that had struck my homeland. God is now giving my people plenty of bread to eat. Though, I do care for you, I long to be with my relatives. The time to go back is now.”

Orpah and Ruth also cared for their mother-in-law, and they wanted to take care of her. So they decided to accompany Naomi on her return to Judah.

On their journey, Naomi began to worry about her daughters-in-law. She told them, “Go back—each of you should return to your mother’s house, and care for your own mother. I appreciate that you have supported me after my husband and sons have died. Other women would have abandoned me, especially since I am not of your people. But both of you have treated me with kindness and respect. Therefore, may the Eternal deal kindly with you, just as you have dealt with me. And may God bless each of you to find a new husband and grant you a new home.”

Then she kissed Orpah and Ruth, and wept.

Naomi's daughters-in-law said, "No, we will not go back. We will come with you and live among your people." They loved her so much that they were willing to leave their own country.

But Naomi insisted, saying, "You have truly been daughters to me. But for your own sakes, go back to your people. Why go with me to live in a foreign land? There is nothing in it for you. I am too old to get married again and produce more sons for you to marry. And even if I could, would you wait for them year after year until they were old enough to marry? Why deny yourselves finding husbands now, when you are still young and full of life? No, my daughters, for it grieves me much for your sakes that the hand of the Eternal is gone out against me."

And they all wept again.

Then Orpah, accepting her mother-in-law's reasoning, kissed Naomi goodbye and returned to Moab. But Ruth refused to go back.

Naomi pleaded with Ruth to change her mind. She said, "Orpah has gone back to her people, and her foreign gods and customs. If you come with me, you will be a foreigner among my people. You should do as your sister-in-law did and return to Moab."

But Ruth was an unusual woman. Even though she, as a Moabite, grew up among false religious customs and traditions, she wanted none of these things. The followers of Chemosh, the chief false god of Moab, were required to offer up their little babies for child sacrifices!

Ruth said to Naomi, "Please, do not force me to go back. I do not want to leave you. Wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God. And wherever you settle down and eventually die, I will die there, too, and be buried with you. May the Eternal deal with me if I allow anything but death to come between you and me."

Naomi was amazed by her daughter-in-law's unusual faith. When she saw how determined Ruth was to accompany her to Judah, Naomi decided to stop trying to change her mind (Ruth 1:1-18).

Naomi Returns Home

The journey from Moab took more than a week. Naomi and Ruth had to descend from the hills of Moab, down into the lush Jordan Valley, and then ascend into the hill country of Naomi's people.

Eventually, the two women came to Bethlehem, at the beginning of the barley harvest (which was usually in the middle to end of April). News of Naomi's arrival spread throughout the town. Her friends and

relatives, whom she had not seen for many years, came out to greet her, saying, “After all these years, can this be Naomi?” The last time they had seen her, Naomi was a young wife and mother. Now she was an old widow, weathered by age and life experiences.

“Do not call me Naomi. Instead, call me Mara. For the Almighty God has dealt very bitterly with me. When I left for Moab years ago, I went out full and satisfied, with a loving husband and two growing sons. But the Eternal has brought me back home again empty; I am without either husband or sons. So why call me Naomi, seeing that the Almighty has testified against me, and has afflicted me with this trial?”

The name *Naomi* means “beautiful” and “pleasant,” while *Mara* means “bitter” (Ruth 1:19-22).

Ruth Meets Boaz

One day, in need of food supplies, Ruth said to Naomi, “The crops are being harvested. Let me go out of the city to glean ears of corn in the field after him in whose sight I may find favor.”

Naomi replied, “Go, my daughter.”

Long ago, God established laws that allowed the fatherless, widows, and foreigners living among the Israelites to follow behind the workers who reaped the harvest, and collect the grain that was left for them. Just as God had mercy on His people Israel and delivered them from Egypt, He expected them to have mercy on the poor. But instead of simply giving them the food, God expected the needy to gather it for themselves. In this way, they would appreciate God’s merciful ways and not take them for granted (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

So Ruth left Bethlehem to glean from the fields. Unknowingly (but nevertheless, arranged by God), she came to a part of a community field that belonged to Boaz. He was a valiant man of great wealth and influence—and he just happened to be a relative of Naomi’s dead husband. The name *Boaz* means “strength.”

Ruth asked the foreman, “Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.” Sheaves were bundles of grain stalks that were tied together to carry to the threshing floor.

Knowing that his master was an honest and upright man, the servant allowed Ruth to glean from Boaz’s field. Ruth happily worked throughout the day, gathering crops as much as she could.

As she continued gathering, Boaz arrived and greeted his servants, who were reaping the bountiful harvested. He said to them, “May the Eternal be with you!”

And they all answered, “May the Eternal bless you, Boaz!” These men were happy to be working for such an honest, diligent, God-fearing man.

Boaz surveyed the scene and noticed that a beautiful woman was gleaning crops from his field. Guided by God, Boaz asked his servant, the foreman in charge of Boaz’s reapers, “Whose young woman is this? Who is she?”

The servant said, “That is the Moabite woman who accompanied Naomi out from Moab. She asked me to allow her to glean and gather after the reapers. She has been working hard from morning until now, only resting for a little in the house.” This house was really a temporary shelter that sat by the side of the field.

Impressed, Boaz approached Ruth and said to her, “Please listen to me. Do not glean in another field, nor go from here, but stay close to my young female servants, who are cutting the grain with sickles. Keep your eyes on them and reap in the field where they reap. Wherever they go, go with them. I have charged all my servants to not lay a finger on you. And when you become thirsty, go to the vessels and drink the water that the young men have drawn.”

Ruth was amazed at the favor she was being granted. She fell on her face and bowed herself to the ground. She said to Boaz, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me? I am just a foreigner among your people.”

Boaz said, “I’ve heard of all that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband died—and how you have left your father and mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to live among strangers.”

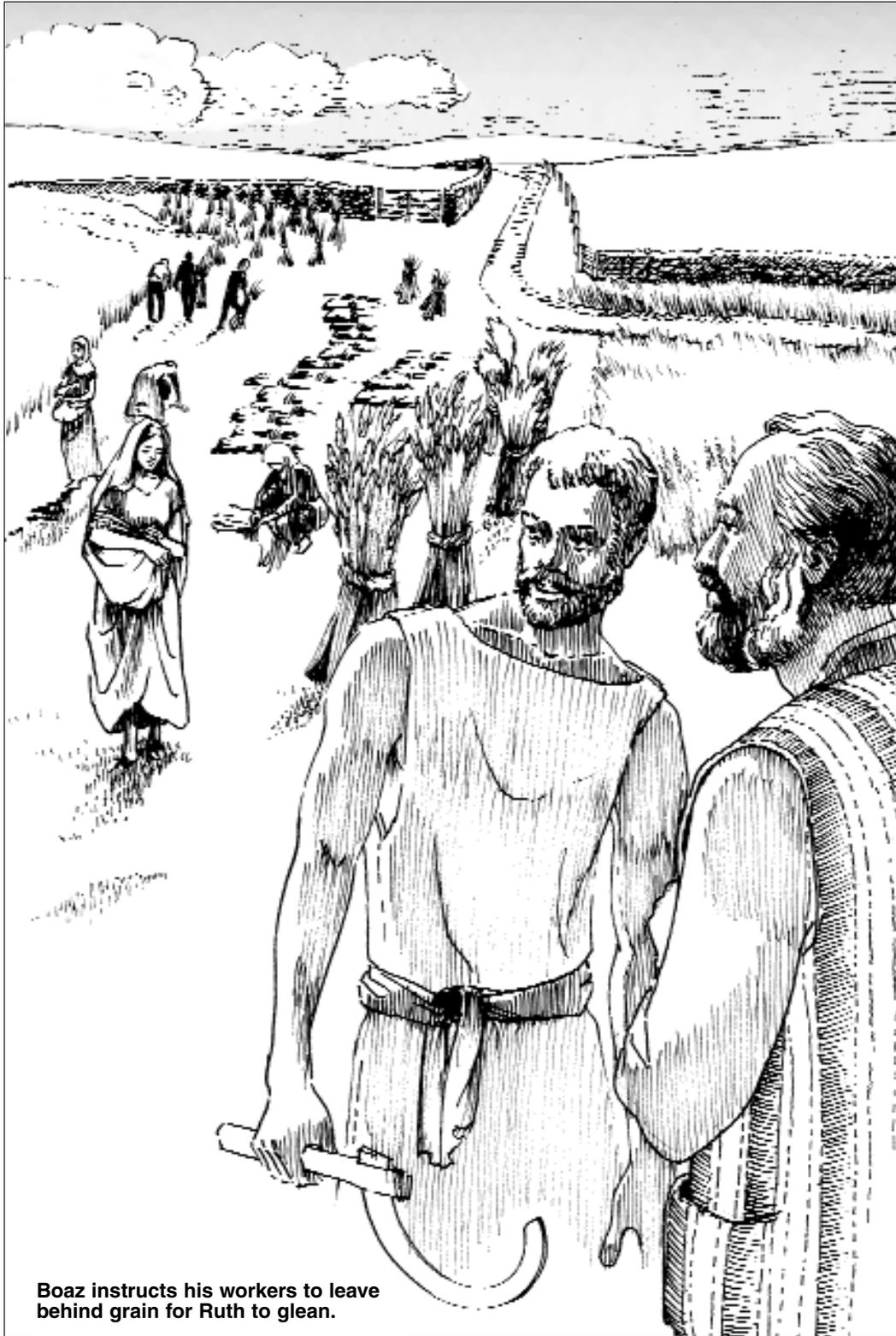
Ruth then realized that Naomi had been quick to speak well of her.

“May God repay you for your hard work and loyalty. And may you receive a full reward from the Eternal God of Israel, whose wings you have come to trust.”

Then Ruth said, “Let me find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me. You have spoken kindly to me as though I was your maidservant, even though I am not.”

At mealtime, Boaz said to Ruth, “Come here and eat of the bread, and dip your piece in the vinegar.” The vinegar was a mixture of sour wine and a little oil. It was used to quench the workers’ thirst, helping them to labor under the hot sun.

Ruth sat beside the reapers, and they passed parched corn to her, which she ate until she was satisfied. She put away the uneaten portion of her lunch, and then went back to the field to resume gleaning.



Boaz instructs his workers to leave behind grain for Ruth to glean.

After she left their presence, Boaz commanded his servants, “Let Ruth glean among the sheaves, and let none of you rebuke her. And also purposefully let some of the handfuls fall and leave them for her so that she may glean these, too.”

Ruth gleaned in the field until evening came, beating out what she had gathered. It came to about an ephah of barley—over one-half bushel, weighing about 30 to 40 pounds. She took the fruit of her labor and went back into Bethlehem.

As Naomi examined the bounty that her daughter-in-law had brought home, Ruth took out the unfinished portion of her lunch and gave it to Naomi to eat.

Naomi said, “Ruth, where have you gleaned today—in which field did you work? May God bless the man who took notice of you.”

When Ruth explained that she had worked in Boaz’s field, Naomi said, “Blessed be Boaz, a man of God! He has not failed to show kindness to the living and to the dead. Boaz is one of our close relatives.”

Sometimes, husbands died without having sons to carry on the family line. Whenever this happened, the widowed wife was to marry the dead husband’s closest relative—a redeemer. Then the firstborn son of their marriage would legally belong to the dead husband, ensuring that his family line would continue. All sons born afterward would belong to the new husband.

Naomi thought that perhaps Boaz could become Ruth’s redeemer, and provide descendants for Mahlon.

Ruth told Naomi about Boaz’s instruction for Ruth to keep close to his servants when gleaning crops, right up to the end of the harvest.”

Naomi agreed, saying, “It is good that you go work with his handmaids, so that other field workers do not encounter you in any other field.”

From then on, Ruth followed Boaz’s instruction, to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest (Ruth 2:1-23).

Ruth Finds a Redeemer

One day, Naomi approached Ruth with a matter that was growing heavy on her mind. She said, “You have been such a wonderful daughter to me. I feel responsible for your future security. You should get married again, start a family and live life to the fullest.

“Now consider Boaz, our close relative. He is sifting his barley tonight at the threshing floor. Bathe and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor where Boaz is working. But do not make your presence known to him until after he has fin-

ished eating and drinking, and lies down to sleep. Take notice of where he lies down, and then go in, uncover his feet, and lie down. Boaz will tell you what you should do.”

Ruth nodded, saying, “I will do all that you have said.” So Ruth went down to the threshing floor, and followed Naomi’s instruction.

After Boaz finished dinner, he felt sleepy, so he went to lie down at the end of a heap of corn. Seeing this, Ruth quietly came near him and uncovered his feet, and then lay down.

Around midnight, Boaz turned in his sleep and was startled to discover a woman lying at his feet! He said, “Who are you?”

Ruth answered, “I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your skirt over your maidservant, for you are a near kinsman to me—a redeemer.”

Boaz said, “Blessed are you of the Eternal, for you have shown more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, in that you do not follow young men, whether poor or rich. Now, my daughter, do not fear—I will do all that you request, for all of Bethlehem knows that you are a virtuous woman.

“Now, it’s true that I am your near kinsman and redeemer—however, there is a kinsman closer than I am. Wait here this night. In the morning, I shall see whether this man will perform the duty of a redeemer for you. If he does, let him do it. But if he will not, then will I do the part of a kinsman to you, just as surely as the Eternal lives.”

Ruth did as Boaz had instructed and lay down at his feet until morning. Then she arose before anyone could see her.

Boaz said, “Let it not be known that a woman came into the floor. Bring the veil that you have brought with you and hold it.”

When she held it, Boaz measured some barley (twice as much as she had previously gleaned), and gave it to her. He said, “Take this to Naomi. I do not want you to go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”

Ruth took the much-appreciated gift, and then went back home to tell Naomi all that Boaz had done.

Naomi said, “Sit still, Ruth, until you find out how this matter will conclude itself. Boaz will not rest until he has finished the thing this very day” (Ruth 3:1-18).

Boaz Redeems Ruth

Boaz went up to the gate, the public place where everyday business transactions took place. Sitting down, Boaz saw the kinsman whom he told Ruth about.

Boaz caught the man’s attention, and said, “Hold on! Sit down here!” The man stopped and sat down next to Boaz.

Then Boaz invited ten of the elders of Bethlehem to come sit down with him, which they did.

Boaz said to the kinsman, “Naomi, who has returned from Moab, is about to sell a portion of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought to let you know about this. You are the closest legal relative. Buy the land in the presence of the inhabitants and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if not, then tell me, so that I may know. Legally, there is none closer to redeem it beside you; I am after you.”

The man said, “I will redeem it.”

Boaz said, “When you buy this field from Naomi, you must also buy it from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Naomi’s dead son. You must keep alive the name of this man through his inheritance.” This meant that the man would have to pay for a family—potential offspring with Ruth—that would not be a part of his own family’s inheritance.

The kinsman said, “I can’t afford to redeem it for myself; it will ruin my own inheritance in the process. You redeem my right to buy it. I can’t redeem it.”

In order to confirm this business transaction, the two men followed the custom of the times: The kinsman took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz. This stood as a testimony, or witness, among the people of Israel.

Then Boaz said to the elders and to all the other people there, “You are witnesses this day: I have bought all that belonged to Elimelech, his sons and Naomi. Moreover, I purchased Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife, to keep alive the name of Mahlon through his inheritance, so that the family name is not cut off from among his brethren, nor from his position at the gate.”

All the people there, including the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the Eternal make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel. And may you, Boaz, prosper and be famous in Bethlehem. Let your house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, of the descendants God shall give you from this young woman.”

So Boaz took Ruth to be his wife, and God blessed her to bear a son, who was legally considered to be Mahlon’s son. All the sons born to them later belonged to Boaz.

The women of the city said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Eternal, who has not left you without a kinsman. May his name be famous throughout Israel, and a restorer of life, and a nourisher of your old age—for your daughter-in-law Ruth, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.”

Naomi took her grandson to her bosom and nursed him.

Then the women said, “There is a son born to Naomi, and his name shall be Obed.”

Years later, Boaz and Ruth became the great-grandparents of a very special boy, whose name was David. We will soon read about him (Ruth 4:1-22).



CHAPTER SEVENTY

GOD CALLS SAMUEL

There was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah. He came from Ramah (I Samuel 1:19; 7:17), which was about six miles north of Jerusalem. An Ephrathite, he was from the tribe of Levi (I Chronicles 6).

In spite of God's command for man to only be married to one wife at a time, Elkanah had two wives. As a Levite born and raised to know God's laws, statutes and judgments, Elkanah should have known better. His wife Peninnah bore him several children, but Hannah, his other wife, was barren. This led Peninnah to believe that she was better than Hannah, which is why she teased Hannah and treated her as her rival.

Long ago, God ruled that Israelite men must attend His holy festivals before His tabernacle: The Days of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits (later called Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:1-17; Exodus 23:14-19; 34:23).

And so, every year, Elkanah left his home to worship the Eternal and make sacrifices at God's tabernacle, in Shiloh, which was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, between Bethel and Shechem. When Elkanah made his offering, he gave portions to Peninnah and to all of her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave an even better portion, for he loved Hannah and wanted her to know that he truly cared for her.

And every year, Peninnah grew jealous of her husband's generosity toward Hannah. She taunted Hannah, constantly striving to irritate her and cause her to worry and weep—even to the point of not eating.

But Hannah and the others did not understand that God had shut up Hannah's womb to fulfill a great purpose.

Elkanah tried to comfort Hannah. He said, "Why do you weep and deny yourself food? Why does your heart grieve so? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

After everyone in Shiloh had finished eating and drinking, Hannah got up to find a place to pray. When she found a place, Hannah cried in bitterness of soul as she earnestly prayed for God to



Elkanah comforts Hannah.

hear her pleas. Her prayer was so intense, so heartfelt, that she made a special vow to the Eternal.

She said, “Almighty God of Israel, if You will look upon the affliction of your maidservant, and remember me, and give me a baby boy, then I will give him to serve You all the days of his life as a Nazarite. Never shall a razor come upon his head. Nor shall he drink wine or eat grapes or raisins. And he shall not come near the dead.” In saying this, Hannah was making a Nazarite vow for her unborn child—if God would bless her with a boy (I Samuel 1:1-11).

God Hears Hannah’s Plea

Now Eli the high priest was sitting by a post of God’s tabernacle when he took note of Hannah quietly praying. When he noticed that her lips moved, but could not hear Hannah say anything, Eli thought, “This woman must be drunk.” Unfortunately, due to Israel’s long, downhill

slide into rotteness, it may not have been uncommon for drunks to enter the sanctuary.

So he said to her, “How long will you be drunk? Put away your wine.”

But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am not drunk. I’m just a woman of great sorrow, and I was pouring out my heart to God in prayer. Please do not confuse me for a servant of Belial, the false god of the pagans. I pour out my complaints and grief only to the God of Israel.” She poured out her whole heart to God, unlike many in the world today who put on a big “show” when praying before people.

Eli realized he had made a mistake. He said to her, “Go in peace, then and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of Him.”

She said, “Thank you. And let your servant find favor in your sight.”

Then Hannah departed, and later ate food, for she was no longer sad.

Early the next morning, Elkanah and his family worshiped before God, and then returned home to their house in Ramah.

God remembered Hannah’s heartfelt pleas for His mercy, and it soon came to pass that Hannah gave birth to a baby boy. She called him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the Eternal.” In Hebrew, the name *Samuel* means “heard of God” (I Samuel 1:9-20).

Young Samuel Dedicated to God’s Service

Once again, it was time for Elkanah and everyone in his family to go up to Shiloh and offer the yearly sacrifice before God at His holy tabernacle.

But Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, “I will not go up until my baby is weaned—then I will bring him, so that he may appear before God and spend his life serving Him in Shiloh.” Usually, babies were not weaned from their mother’s milk until they were two or three years old.

As her husband, Elkanah had the right to nullify or confirm his wife’s vow (Numbers 30:6-15). Elkanah supported Hannah’s decision, and said, “Do what seems good to you. Wait until you have weaned Samuel; only the Eternal establish His word.”

So Hannah did as he said.

When the baby was finally weaned, she took him up to God’s tabernacle, along with three bullocks, and one ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine. She did this to fulfill her vow (Numbers 15:8-10). However, in doing so, Hannah offered God three larger measures than required, going above and beyond what was expected from her.

There, a bullock was slain, and baby Samuel was brought to Eli the

high priest. Hannah said to him, “My lord, I am the woman that stood by you here, praying to the Eternal. I asked God to bless me to give birth to a baby boy.” Pointing to Samuel, she said, “This is the child I prayed for. In return, I have lent my only son to the Eternal; as long as Samuel lives, he shall serve God and do His work at the holy tabernacle.”

Hannah was gratefully giving her gift (baby Samuel) back to the Giver (God).

Overflowing with joy, she prayed, “My heart rejoices in the Eternal, for He is my strength. There is no other god besides the God of Israel. Every person should watch his mouth, for the Eternal is a God of knowledge, who judges people by their actions. He humbles those who exalt themselves.” She was even inspired to speak of the One who will, many centuries later, set up God’s kingdom and judge earth—Jesus Christ (I Samuel 1:21-28; 2:1-11).

After the yearly sacrifice was offered and the festival ended, Elkanah and his family returned home.

But Samuel was left in the care and training of Eli the high priest at God’s earthly headquarters, in Shiloh. Samuel would learn to assist Eli in carefully performing priestly duties.

“Sons of Belial”

Eli had two sons—Hophni and Phineas—who served under their father as God’s priests. But in reality, Hophni and Phineas served Satan, the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4), and his way of selfishness and greed—the way of get. The Bible calls them the “sons of Belial.” Though from birth they were raised in God’s special knowledge, they did not truly *know* God. They knew *of* God, but they did not know Him personally, for they did not obey God nor seek His will.

In recognizing their loyal service to Him, God allowed His priests to keep for themselves specific parts of a bull or sheep offering—the shoulder, the cheeks and the stomach (Deuteronomy 18:3).

But Hophni and Phineas lusted for more. Every time an Israelite came to offer meat sacrifices at Shiloh, these wicked priests had their servant dip a three-prong hook into the pot in which the offering was being boiled. The servant would then pull out all the meat he could catch, and give it to his masters. This greedy practice soon became a custom of these priests.

When a peace offering was given, the priest was to burn its fat on the altar. However, God gave the breast to the high priest and his sons



Hannah delivers
Samuel to Eli.

(Leviticus 7:28-31).

Eli's sons had their servant take the offering *before* the fat was burned. "Don't bother roasting the fat or boiling the meat," the servant would say. "The priest will take it from you raw."

Sometimes a man who offered sacrifices replied, "But the fat needs to be burned first; after this, the priest may take as much as his soul desires" (verses 31-36; 10:14-15; Deuteronomy 18:1-5).

But the servant would say, "No! Give it to me now! If not, I will take it from you by force!"

In God's eyes, Hophni and Phineas were committing great sins. Even worse, they were setting the wrong example for God's people,

and caused them to despise giving offerings. Eli's sons acted as though God did not exist, and therefore would not punish them for the sins.

When Eli was very old, he heard reports of all the wicked things that his sons did to their fellow Israelites—especially how they mistreated and sinned with the women who assembled at God's tabernacle. They treated God's sanctuary the way pagan priests did with their temples of false gods.

Eli approached Hophni and Phineas, and said, "Why do you commit such evil acts? I have heard about the wicked dealings you have done to God's people. My sons, your sinful examples are causing your brother Israelites to break God's laws. If a man sins against another man, he shall be judged by his peers. But if a man sins against the Eternal, as you both do, who shall intervene for him? As His priests, God expects you to set the right example for His people. If you continue to live the wrong way, God will slay you."

Despite their father's plea to repent, Hophni and Phineas did not listen.

Though Eli rebuked them, he did not remove them from their offices of leadership. As a result, their wicked example continued to vex and poison Israel. Good parents must always be ready to correct their children. Otherwise, their kids will grow up to be rotten adults (I Samuel 2:12-17).

Judgment From God

One day, God, using one of His servants, gave Eli a message: "Did I not plainly appear to Aaron, your forefather, when My people lived in Egypt under Pharaoh's rule? And did I not choose Aaron from all the tribes of Israel to be My high priest—to offer sacrifices upon My altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod before Me? Did I not also give to Aaron and his descendants all the offerings made by fire given by the children of Israel?"

"Why, then, do you kick at My sacrifices and My offerings, which I have commanded to be given at My tabernacle? And why do you honor your sons above Me? Instead of punishing them, you have allowed Hophni and Phineas to make themselves fat with the choice parts of all the offerings that My people Israel offer.

"I had established that you and your house and the house of your father would serve Me as My priests forever. However, the wickedness of your sons, and your failure to punish them, has changed this. To those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise Me, I will despise them.

“Behold, the days come when I will destroy the strength, power and influence of you and your family line, that there shall not be an old man in your house. And you shall see calamity in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in your house forever. And the man of yours, whom I shall not cut off from My altar, shall be to consume your eyes, and to grieve your heart: and all the increase of your house shall die in the flower of their age. This shall be a sign to you that shall come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas. In one day, they shall both die.

“And I will raise me up a faithful priest, who shall do according to that which is in My heart and mind. And I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before My anointed forever.

“And it shall come to pass that every one who is left in your house shall come beg for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, ‘Put me, I pray you, into one of the priests’ offices, that I may eat a piece of bread.’ Those who insist on gorging themselves on My sacrifices will beg for even the tiniest morsel of food” (I Samuel 1:22-36).

God Calls Samuel

While Eli’s sons continued to do evil, young Samuel spent his childhood learning how to carefully serve God, under Eli’s fatherly direction.

Samuel’s mother made him a little robe, or cloak, that reached down to his knees. He wore this beneath a linen ephod, which he had on when he served at God’s tabernacle. She visited Samuel year after year, when she came up to Shiloh with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.

Eli blessed Elkanah and Hannah, saying, “May the Eternal give you more children in exchange for you having dedicated Samuel to God’s service.” He praised Hannah for keeping her word and being faithful to her vow.

God blessed Hannah with three sons and two daughters. When people put God first, He puts them first.

Meanwhile, as Samuel grew up, he earned a good reputation among both God and men.

One early morning, while the teenaged boy slept in his sleeping quarters, Samuel heard someone call out his name. He could see that it was still dark outside, for the golden lampstand in the holy place was still lit. (Fueled by olive oil, the lamp was lit at twilight, and kept burning from evening until morning.)

Samuel answered, “Here I am,” but when he looked around, he saw that no one was there.

So he ran to Eli, woke him up, and said, “Here I am. Did you call for me?”

“I didn’t call for you, Samuel,” Eli said. “You must be hearing things. Go lie down and get back to sleep.”

The lad did as Eli said and lay down in his bed.

Then Samuel heard his name called again. Quickly, he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am.”

But Eli said, “My son, I didn’t call you. Go get your rest.”

Samuel was puzzled. Neither he nor Eli realized that God was trying to get his attention. In those days, it was extremely rare for God to reveal Himself to people. The few visions God did give were not widely known. And, since God had not spoken to him before, Samuel did not consider that it was the Creator of the universe who was calling him.



So when Samuel heard his name being called a third time, he got up and went to Eli, and again said, “Here I am.”

Eli finally put two and two together, and slowly realized that God was calling Samuel. Eli said to the boy, “Go lie down as you did before and wait for God to call for you again. If He does, answer Him and say, “Please speak, Eternal God—Your servant hears You.”

So Samuel followed Eli’s instruction.

Yet again, God called for the boy. This time Samuel answered, saying, “Please speak, Eternal God—Your servant hears You.”

God said to Samuel, “Behold, I will do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears it to tingle. I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house; and when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told Eli that I will judge his house forever for the sins which he knows—because his sons have made themselves vile, cursing Me through their repeated wickedness. Yet Eli did not restrain them.”

Samuel lay until the morning, until it was time for him to open the doors of the tabernacle. As he went about his duties, Samuel thought about what God had said, and he feared to tell Eli, for he respected him as a father.

When Eli called for Samuel, he asked the boy, “What did the Eternal say to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the things that God said to you.”

Reluctantly, Samuel told Eli everything that God had said, hiding nothing from him.

Eli accepted God’s judgment, and said, “It is the Eternal’s will. Let Him do what seems right in His eyes.”

As Samuel grew to adulthood, God was with him, speaking to him often. Eventually, all of Israel—from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south—came to recognize that God had made Samuel to be His prophet. Everything Samuel said would happen always came true.

And he continued to reveal God’s will to all Israel (I Samuel 2:18-26; 3:1-21; 4:1).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

“WE WANT A KING!”

Because Israel had long ago failed to get rid of Canaan’s inhabitants, God judged that the Israelites would be vexed by their enemies. This is why Israel suffered from constant oppression by the Philistines.

Finally, Israel had had enough. They decided to meet their long-time enemy in battle. Israel’s army encamped beside a place called Ebenezer, while the Philistines’ massive army assembled at Aphek, which marked the northeastern edge of Philistine territory.

When the two forces advanced onto the battlefield, the Philistines defeated the Israelites, killing about 4,000 soldiers. Clearly, God was not with Israel, else He would have given them the victory.

Seeing the bloodied survivors return to camp, the elders of Israel said among themselves, “Why has the Eternal struck us down before these Philistines? What have we done to deserve this?”

One leader came up with a plan: “What if we go to Shiloh and bring back the Ark of the Covenant? With it by our side, we’re guaranteed to be victorious over our enemy!”

Israel was copying the surrounding pagan nations, who always brought their false gods and good luck charms into battle with them. Instead of sincerely seeking God’s will, the Israelites decided to take matters into their own hands.

So the people sent men to Shiloh, entered God’s holy tabernacle, and brought back the Ark. Hophni and Phinehas, Eli’s wicked sons, gave their approval and went with them.

When the Ark of the Covenant reached the camp, the whole army of Israel shouted for joy—so much, that the earth rang. Israel should have humbled themselves and sought God’s guidance, not allow themselves to be full of pride. Though they knew that the Ark symbolized God’s power and presence, they foolishly confused the Ark with God’s actual presence. In bringing the Ark into battle, Israel was trying to force God into doing their bidding. But God is not some magical “genie” who does whatever people demand of Him.

From their encampment, the Philistines heard the Israelites’ shouts echo across the countryside. Some said, “What does this great shout-

ing mean? Why are these Hebrews so happy? They should be weeping as they nurse their wounds!”

Philistine spies reported that Israel had brought the Ark of God to fight alongside them.

Hearing this, the Philistines were afraid. They thought that the Ark was some kind of idol, and that God lived in it. This was how the Philistines viewed their false gods and idols.

Some said, “God is in their camp! Whenever the God of Israel fights for His people, victory is certain—and that means we’re doomed! No one can deliver us out of the hand of Israel’s God. This is the same One who struck the Egyptians with terrible plagues.”

But others said, “Be strong, and stand your ground like men, you Philistines! Don’t allow these Hebrews to make you into their servants, as they have been to you. They will avenge themselves for all the cruel things that we’ve done to them. So stand your ground, and get ready to fight!”

When the battle came, the Philistines fought as though they had nothing to lose—and, despite having the Ark of the Covenant beside them, Israel was defeated! Had the Israelites realized that the Eternal feeds, protects and cares for all who obey His voice and put His will first, they would have been victorious.

Every Israelite soldier fled back to his tent. One man, from the tribe of Benjamin, escaped to Shiloh. His clothes were torn and his head had dust on it; he did this to himself as a sign of mourning for the dead, and of national calamity.

As the bearer of bad news, the Benjamite entered the city and told everyone he could find what had happened. The whole city cried and mourned because of Israel’s humiliating defeat.

Meanwhile, Eli was sitting by the wayside, waiting for news of the recent battle. When he heard the people’s cries, he asked the man, “What does this great cry mean?”

Hastily, the man stepped closer to the high priest and said, “I’ve just come back from the frontlines. Israel’s army fled before the Philistines, and there was a great slaughter—30,000 Israelites are dead! And so are your sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Even worse, the Ark of the Covenant is now in the hands of the Philistines!”

Hophni and Phinehas died just as God had said. And God allowed His Ark to be captured to teach Israel that they could not force their will on Him.

When he heard that the Ark had been captured by pagans, Eli fell from off his seat backward, and broke his neck. Eli the high priest was dead, fulfilling God’s judgment against him. He lived to be 98 years

old, and had been a judge over Israel for 40 years, as well as a priest.

Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, and was about to give birth. But when she heard the horrible news about the Ark, and that both her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she was in great pain and anguish—even to the point of death.

Midwives stood by her side, and said, "Do not fear. You have given birth to a son."

But the grieving woman did not answer.

She came to name her child "Ichabod," which means "Where is the glory?" or "no glory." She said, "The glory is departed from Israel, because the ark of God was captured by our enemies, and because Eli and Phinehas are dead."

To all of the Israelites, the Ark's capture was a symbol of God leaving Israel (I Samuel 4:1-22).

God Strikes the Philistines

From their camp at Ebenezer, the Philistines took the Ark of the Covenant to Ashdod, one of their five major city-states, about 33 miles west of Jerusalem.

Like the Israelites, the Philistines believed that possessing the Ark meant that they could control God. So they paraded it through the streets of Ashdod, as throngs of citizens laughed and danced. As they did with all religious spoils of war, the Philistines brought the Ark to the pagan temple of Dagon, the chief of their false gods, and set it beside Dagon's idol, which was the image of a half man-half fish.

One of the Philistine leaders said to his men, "This is where the Ark of Israel's God belongs—sitting powerless before Dagon."

"Yes," his assistant added. "Israel's God may have destroyed Egypt with ten plagues, but that's only because the gods of the Egyptians are weak. They are no match for our gods. And certainly, Israel's God poses no threat to us. Why should we be afraid when we mowed down His people in battle and took their Ark away from them?"

The men all laughed and hurled more insults at God. Then they departed for their homes, confident that their god was greater than the Eternal.

Early the next morning, the people were surprised to discover that Dagon's idol had fallen upon its face, bowing on the ground before the Ark of God! The Eternal showed that He was superior to the Philistines' false god.

Shocked and embarrassed, the people rushed to set Dagon's idol back in its place.

The next morning, the same thing happened again: The idol of Dagon had fallen upon its face before God's ark. And this time, the idol's head and palms were cut off; the only thing left was the idol's stump! In ancient times, warriors would often cut off the heads and hands of their enemies, and use the body parts as proof that their adversaries had been slain. By cutting off the head and palms of Dagon's idol, God wanted the Philistines to realize that their false god was powerless before His might.

From that day on, Dagon's superstitious priests and followers did not dare to tread upon the idol's threshold. In their eyes, it became sacred because Dagon's hands had broken on it. They now believed the threshold was cursed.

Next, God struck the people of Ashdod with a horrible, painful sickness—tumors. The Philistines could barely sit without feeling as though they were being constantly jabbed and pricked in their most sensitive places. Carried by diseased rats, God's plague quickly spread throughout the city, and even to the many Philistine towns, villages and settlements along the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea.

When the Philistines of Ashdod saw all this, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel shall not stay with us, for His hand is sore upon us, and upon Dagon our god."

So they sent for and gathered all the lords of the Philistines. These five men were the chief rulers of their peoples; each lord ruled one of the five major city-states of Philistia, but united under one central government.

The people said to them, "What shall we do with the Ark of Israel's God?"

The lords decided to move the Ark to the city of Gath, which was about 12 miles east of Ashdod.

After this, God's hand moved against Gath, causing great destruction there. He struck down every man in the city, both small and great, with the same horrible, painful plague of tumors that had spread throughout Ashdod.

The people of Gath sent the Ark to the city of Ekron, which was about six miles north and the closest major city to Israel's border. But when the ones living there saw that the Ark of the Covenant was being transferred to their city, they were upset.

"They've brought that thing to our city," they said. "They're trying to destroy us!"

And they had all the lords of the Philistines gather together, and made demands. "Send this Ark away—let it go back to where it belongs!" they shouted. "We want to live!"

God's punishment against them grew worse the more they refused to humble themselves before Him—just like the Egyptians had done (I Samuel 5:1-12).

Appeasing God

The Philistines were becoming desperate. They knew that they had to figure out how to appease God so that He would stop His plague. But it never occurred to them to put away their idols, worship God, and obey His laws. Driven by carnal nature, people have always wanted to get God to bless them as they continue to reject His will.

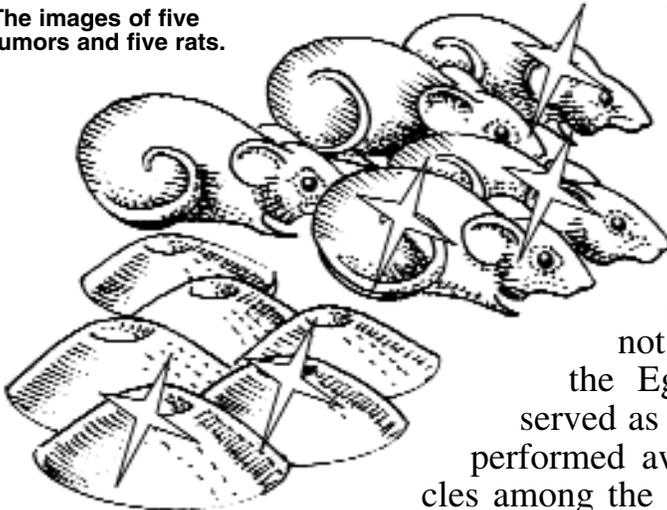
The Philistines turned to their false priests and wicked diviners, and asked them, "What shall we do with the Ark of the Eternal? How shall we send it back to its place?"

The priests and diviners said, "We have offended Israel's God. Therefore, if you send the Ark away, do not send it away empty. Return it with a trespass offering to acknowledge that we have trespassed against—dishonored—the God of Israel. Then you shall all be healed, and you shall know why the hand of Israel's God is not removed from you."

"What shall this trespass offering be?" the people asked.

"Five golden images of tumors, according to the five lords of the Philistines, and to the five cities each lord rules—Ashdod, Gaza, Askalon, Gath and Ekron. And add five golden images of rats, according to the number of all the cities that belong to the five lords, both fenced cities and country villages. For one plague was on you all, and on your lords. You shall use the images of tumors and rats to glorify Israel's God and to acknowledge that He is the source behind our current suffering. Who knows? Perhaps He will remove His hand from you, our gods, and from our land."

The images of five tumors and five rats.



Who knows? Perhaps He will remove His hand from you, our gods, and from our land."

Sensing that some of the people did not like this plan, the false priests and diviners warned them not to harden their hearts, as the Egyptians did when Israel served as their slaves. "Though God performed awesome and mighty miracles among the Egyptians, they refused to

bend. They did not let His people go—and yet Israel still left them! The Egyptians were helpless against Israel’s God.”

Though performed many generations ago, God’s ten plagues left a lasting impression upon the surrounding nations.

Next, the false priests and diviners devised a plan to get the Ark of the Covenant back to Israel: The people made a wooden cart, and took two milking cows, which had never been yoked, and tied the cows to the cart. If these milking cows did take the Ark back to Israel—despite the fact that they were untrained in pulling carts—this would be a clear sign that God was guiding them.

The Philistines took the Ark, lay it upon the cart, and put the trespass offering in a chest by its side.

Some of the Philistines held on to doubts that God was behind all their recent troubles. The false priests and diviners said to these doubters, “If these milking cows go against their natural instinct, leave their calves behind, and take this cart to Beth Shemesh, which is near the border of our territory, then we will know that the God of Israel has done this to us. But if they do not, then we shall know that every horrible thing that has happened to us was all time and chance.”

Everyone agreed.

After the cart was released, the cows took it directly to the road that led to Beth Shemesh. Located in the Sorek Valley, Beth Shemesh, which means “house of sun,” was a town that belonged to the tribe of Levi as part of their inheritance. It was located about 15 miles west of Jerusalem.

As they pulled the cart along the highway, the cows cried out for their calves—but they were compelled by an unseen force to head straight for Israel.

The lords of the Philistines took note of this and decided to follow it. “Let’s see what happens to the cart,” they said (I Samuel 6:1-12).

The Ark Returns

The citizens of Beth Shemesh were reaping the wheat harvest in the valley when someone looked up and saw the cart.

“Look over there! I can’t believe my eyes—it’s the Ark of the Covenant!”

Everyone rejoiced!

The cart came into the field of Joshua, and stopped by a great stone. It was obvious to the people that God was using the cart and the cows for His divine purpose. Therefore, they knew that they could not take them for their own personal use. So the people used the wood of the cart



for a sacrificial fire, and offered the cows as a burnt offering to God.

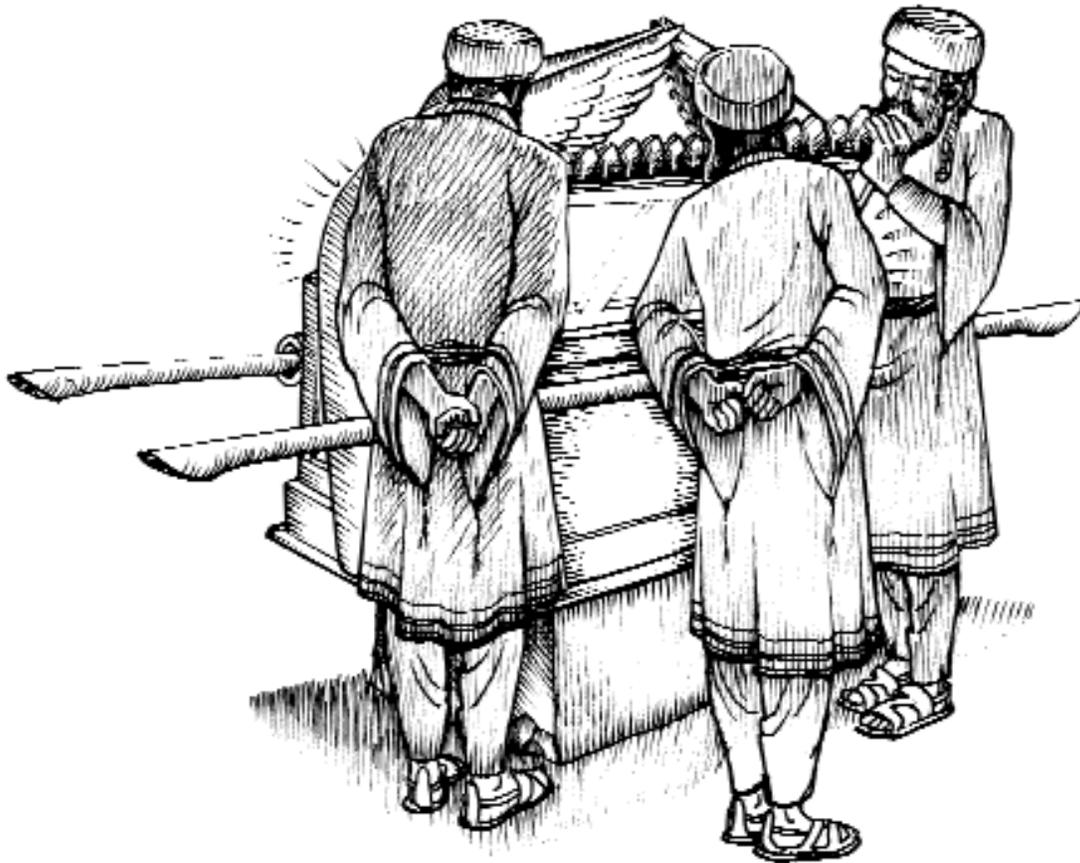
Meanwhile, the five lords of the Philistines watched all that was happening from a safe distance. Satisfied, they returned to Ekron.

The Levites, who were qualified to handle the Ark, took possession of it, and the chest that came with it, and put them on the great stone in Jacob's field.

One leader declared, "This stone stands as a witness that God has returned to Israel."

All the men of Beth Shemesh cheered. In all, the Ark of the Covenant had been in the hands of the Philistines for only seven months—but to the Israelites, it seemed like years. The people continued to celebrate as they offered more burnt offerings and sacrifices to God.

But their festive mood led to a very foolish mistake: The men of Beth Shemesh looked into God's Ark—which they were not allowed to touch! They did not show God the proper fear and respect that He



deserves. Soon the land was filled with sounds of weeping and cries of anguish, for God took away the lives of 50,070 men. The Israelites had to learn that there is a high price to pay for recklessly breaking God's laws and disrespecting His holy things.

Those who survived God's punishment sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath Jearim, which was about 10 miles northeast of Beth Shemesh. Once they arrived, the messengers told them, "The Philistines have brought back the Ark of the Covenant. Come and bring it back with you."

So the men of Kirjath Jearim came down and took the Ark. They brought it to the house of Abinadab, a Levite, and set apart his son Eleazar to take care of it.

And there the Ark stayed for the next 20 years, as the whole nation of Israel mourned and wept to God (I Samuel 6:13-21; 7:1-2).

Samuel Judges Israel

One day, inspired by God, Samuel addressed the people of Israel. He said, "For many years, you have suffered from the oppressive hand of

the Philistines. Only with God's help will you ever be free. Therefore, if you want to return to the Eternal with all your hearts, then put away the false gods, pagan traditions and customs that cut you off from the one true God. Then set your mind to serve the Eternal—and Him only. Do this, and God will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”

Israel did as Samuel said. They put away the idols of Baalim and Ashtoreths, the chief false gods of the Canaanites, and set their lives in order. Everyone began to serve God with all their heart.

Then Samuel said to the people, “Gather the whole nation of Israel to Mizpeh, where I will pray to the Eternal for you.”

The Israelites gathered and assembled at Mizpeh, about eight miles northeast of Kirjath Jearim, where water was drawn and poured out before God. This was a sign of their repentance—of pouring out their hearts to seek God's will.

The Israelites also fasted that day. They denied themselves food and drink so that they could focus on their Supreme Creator, the One who provides all the things that people need to survive.

Samuel judged the Israelites in Mizpeh, giving them God's judgments and instructions, and listening to their grievances and cries for justice. Samuel devoted himself to teaching Israel how to get back to truly serving God (I Samuel 7:3-6).

The Philistines Attack!

When the Philistines heard that Israel was gathered at Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines decided to attack.

Confident that Samuel was close to God, the frightened Israelites said to him, “Don't stop crying out to our God for us! Ask Him to save us from these Philistines!”

Samuel took a sucking lamb, which had to be nursed by its mother for at least seven days (Leviticus 22:27), and offered it for a burnt offering to God. Then he cried out to the Eternal on Israel's behalf.

And God listened.

Meanwhile, the Philistines drew near to launch their deadly attack—but God intervened. He sent great sounds of thunder, striking fear into the hearts of these pagan worshippers. The enemy troops panicked, giving the Israelites opportunity to rush in and slay them. Then the Israelites chased after the survivors, slaying even more of them, until they came under Beth Car.

Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpeh and Shen. He called it Ebenezer, which means “the stone of help.” The prophet said, “Thus far has the Eternal helped us.”

The Philistines were now subdued and stopped invading Israel's coast. The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to God's people—from Ekron to Gath, and the coastal territories. As a result, Gath became the eastern border of Philistine territory. God's hand was against the Philistines throughout Samuel's life. This ended the Philistines' 40-year oppression over Israel (Judges 13:1).

And there was even peace between Israel and the Amorites, who lived in the hills west of Israel, between the Jordan Valley and the coastal plain (I Samuel 7:7-14).

Israel Demands a King

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. From year to year, he traveled a circuit, which allowed him to manage the affairs of God's people. First, he would go to Bethel so he could serve the people of Ephraim and the northern parts of Israel. Then Samuel would journey to Gilgal, and judge the people of Benjamin and those residing across the Jordan River. Next, he would travel to Mizpeh and help the people of Judah, Simeon and Gad. Then, at the end of his annual trip, he returned to his home in Ramah, which was Samuel's main office, or headquarters.

There, he built an altar to God.

When Samuel was old, he made his sons, Joel and Abiah, acting judges, or lieutenants, in Beersheba, which was about 57 miles away from Ramah. However, Samuel's sons did not walk in their father's ways. Instead, they pursued money and took bribes. Whenever they decided matters between opposing parties, Samuel's son sold their rulings to the highest bidder. Thus, they perverted judgment among God's people. The innocent and poor received no help from them.

Fed up with Joel and Abiah's corrupt ways, all the elders of Israel gathered at Ramah, and confronted Samuel.

They said to him, "Samuel, you are old now, and your sons have refused to follow your righteous and just example. Since we cannot get justice, make for us a king—one who will judge us like all the other nations around us!"

Israel wanted to be like everyone else. They did not want to stand out and be different from the rest of the world, those who reject God and His righteous ways. Israel was more concerned about following worldly people than in following God, their Deliverer and Protector.

Samuel was displeased by their demands, so he did what all servants of God do—he prayed. He wanted to know God's will in this matter.

The Eternal said to him, “Listen to the people in all that they say to you, and do not take this personally. They have not rejected you, Samuel—they have rejected Me. They do not want Me to reign over them. These people have forsaken Me since the day I brought them out of Egypt even to this very day, serving other gods. Therefore, listen to their voice.”

Not wanting to follow an invisible King they could not see (God), Israel wanted a human king that everyone could see.

In contrast, God’s people today—those led by the power of His Holy Spirit—walk by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). They believe that God exists, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

“Nevertheless,” God said to Samuel, “you shall remind Israel what to expect if they truly want a human king ruling over them.”

So Samuel spoke before Israel and gave the people the Eternal’s message. He said, “Since you want a human king reigning over your lives like all the other nations, then here is what you can expect: Your king will take your sons and appoint some for his chariots, and some to be his horsemen; and others shall run before his chariots. Your king will appoint for himself captains over thousands and over fifties, and will set them to plant his fields, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war and chariots. Your king will take your daughters to be his personal cooks and bakers. And he will take your fields, your vineyards, and your crops of olive trees—even the best of them—and give them to his servants. And your king will take one tenth of your crops and vineyards, and give them to his officers and servants. He will take your servants, both men and women, and your healthiest, strongest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to do his work. He will take one tenth of your sheep, and you shall be his servants.

“And in that day when you cry out to God because of the burdens and demands of your king—whom you have chosen—the Eternal will not hear you.”

This should have sobered the Israelites. Yet, despite Samuel’s strong warning, the people refused to listen.

They said, “No, Samuel. We want a king over us, so that we can be just like all the other nations, and so that our king may judge us, and go out before us and fight our battles.”

Blinded by their desire to be just like all the other nations, Israel wanted to rely on a human king to protect and lead them. They no longer wanted God as their divine King. How foolish!

When Samuel told God what the people had said, the Eternal replied, “Listen to their voice, Samuel, and make a king for them.”

Sometimes, God gives stubborn people exactly what they want. He does this to teach them that they cannot live according to what seems right to them. Only the Eternal can show people the way that leads to prosperous, abundant living.

Samuel obeyed God's command. He went back to the Israelites and said, "You wanted a king—and so you shall have what you desire!" (I Samuel 7:15-17; 8:1-22).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

SAUL BECOMES KING

There once was a man of wealth and influence named Kish, who was from the tribe of Benjamin. Kish had a young son named Saul, who was more handsome than any other man in Israel. Also, this young man was so tall that he seemed to tower over everyone in the land.

One day, Kish discovered that his donkeys, which were a part of his wealth, had wandered off and had gotten lost. So he instructed Saul to go out and find them.

“And take one of the servants with you,” he said.

Saul dutifully obeyed. He and his servant searched the vast countryside, first passing through the mountains of Ephraim, and then through the land of Shalisha. But the donkeys were nowhere to be found. Even after searching through the land of Shalim, and then through the territory of Benjamin, Saul still could not find the animals.

When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to his servant, “Look, we’ve been searching for these animals for three days. We better return home, or else my father will stop caring about his lost donkeys and will begin to worry about us.”

But the servant said, “Wait, I have an idea! I know of a man of God—a prophet—who lives in a town near here. He’s known to be an honorable man. Everything he says always comes true. What if we go talk to him? Perhaps he can show us where to look.”

Saul said, “It sounds like a good plan, but we don’t have a present to give to this prophet. Even the bread we had brought along with us is now gone. We certainly can’t go to this man empty-handed. What shall we give him?”

“I have a fourth part of a shekel of silver,” the servant answered. “We can give him that. Then the prophet will tell us where to look for your father’s donkeys.” This gift, which was about one tenth of an ounce of silver, was not a bribe. It was only meant to show respect for the prophet’s office as a spokesman for God.

Saul said, “Very well. Let’s go see this man of God.”

So they went to town to see the prophet.

As they traveled up a hill, they met some young women who were going out to draw water. Saul asked them, “Please excuse me. We’re looking for the man known to see visions. Is he in town?”

The young women said, “Yes, he is. The man you’re looking for is just ahead. But you better hurry! He came to town today to attend the great festival and the people’s sacrifice up at the place of worship. As soon as you enter town, you’ll find him at the city gate. But you better get to him right away, before he gets up to bless the sacred meal. The dinner guests cannot eat until he gives the blessing. Now hurry—if you rush, you can still reach him in time!”

Just as Saul and his servant entered the city gate, the prophet Samuel, of whom the young women had been speaking, was on his way to the high place.

The day before, God had told Samuel, “Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the tribe of Benjamin. You shall anoint—set apart—this man to be commander and ruler over My people Israel. I will use him to save My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have looked upon My people, and have heard their cry for help.”

When Samuel saw Saul, the Eternal said to him, “This is the man of whom I spoke! He is the one who shall reign over My people.”

The prophet looked carefully at Saul, from head to toe, and was immediately impressed by the young man’s height and good looks.

Meanwhile, Saul spotted Samuel and walked over to him. He asked, “Excuse me, sir, could you please tell me where the house of the man of God is? He is known to see visions.”

Samuel said, “I am he. Now, come with me to the high place. Today you shall eat with me, and then tomorrow I will answer all your questions.”

“But...”

Samuel quickly said, “Oh, don’t worry about the donkeys that ran off three days ago—they have already been found. All the desire of Israel is now upon you and your father’s house.”

Saul was puzzled by Samuel’s words. “Surely you must be mistaken,” he said, “I’m just a Benjamite. My tribe is the smallest of all the tribes of Israel. And my family is the least of all the families in my tribe. Why then do you speak to me like this?”

Saul’s tribe was still recovering from being almost wiped out from existence during Israel’s civil war. It never dawned on him that God would purposefully choose a king from the smallest Israelite tribe, and from the least important family of that tribe.

But Samuel was beginning to understand why God would do this: Saul had the right attitude—humble, teachable. He did not think that

he was more important than others. God knows that He can work with people who humble themselves, who wait for *Him* to exalt them.

Samuel took the young man and his servant, and brought them into the great dining room. In view of the 30 dinner guests, who were probably important leaders of the community, Samuel gave Saul and his servant the most honorable seats at the table.

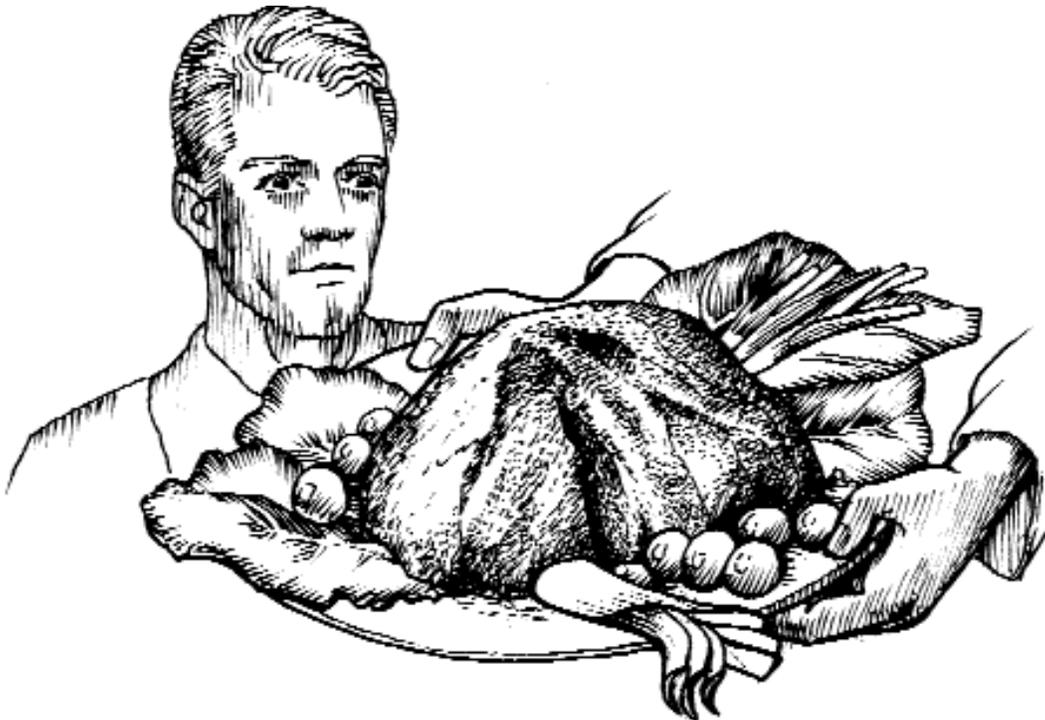
Then Samuel waved for the cook to come over. “Go get that special portion of meat, which I told you to set aside. Bring it here and set it before this man,” he said, pointing to Saul.

The cook did as ordered. He brought out the best of the meat—the thigh and upper portion—which was normally reserved for the priest (Leviticus 7:28-36).

All dinner guests took careful note as the cook set the special meal before Saul. Realizing that Samuel was giving this young man such a high honor, the guests whispered among themselves, saying, “Who is that? Why is Samuel paying so much attention to him?”

The prophet said to Saul, “Go ahead, eat. This meat was saved especially for you. I have even invited these guests to come and eat with you.”

Though he felt uncomfortable being the object of wonder for the 30 dinner guests, Saul dined with Samuel, eating a meal worthy of a king.



After the dinner, Samuel and Saul left the high place and went back into town.

Then Samuel invited Saul to spend the night at his house. “I already have a bed set up for you on the roof.” In those days, some people slept on the flat roofs of homes, and drank in the fresh, cool air (I Samuel 9:1-25).

God Chooses Saul

The next morning Samuel woke up early and called up to the roof. “Wake up, Saul. It’s time you got started on your way.”

Saul arose, then he, his servant and Samuel left the house.

As they headed to the edge of town, Samuel took Saul aside and said to him, “Tell your servant to go on. I need to speak with you privately for a few minutes and tell you what God has said.”

Saul did as instructed, and the servant continued on ahead of them.

Samuel then took a vial of olive oil, poured it upon Saul’s head, and kissed the young man on the cheek. The prophet said, “The Eternal God has anointed you to be the commander over His inheritance, Israel.”

(The Hebrew root word for *Saul* means “asked of God.” From his physical appearance, Saul was the kind of king Israel had asked for—tall, handsome and impressive. But more importantly, Saul was the kind of man God was looking for to be king—humble and not self-important.)

Samuel explained that God would give Saul several signs to prove that He had chosen him to be Israel’s next king:

First, after his departure, Saul would meet two men by Rachel’s tomb at Zelzah, in the territory of Benjamin. They would say to him, “The donkeys you sought are found. Your father has stopped caring about them, and is now worried about you. He wants to know where you are, and whether or not you are safe.”

Saul was to go from there until he came to the plain of Tabor. There, he would meet three men going up to worship God at Bethel. One man would be carrying three young goats. Another would have three loaves of bread. And the other would be carrying a bottle of wine. After greeting Saul, they would give him two loaves of bread.

Then Saul was to go to the hill of God, at Gibeah, where the Philistines had a garrison of soldiers. “And when you come to the city,” said Samuel, “you will meet a group of prophets coming down from a place of worship. They will be prophesying as others walk before them, playing tabrets, flutes and harps. God’s Holy Spirit will

then come upon you, and will inspire you to prophesy along with the prophets. When these signs have come to pass, do what is right, for God will help you.

“Next, you shall go down to Gilgal and wait for me seven days. I will come to you and offer burnt offerings, and sacrifice peace offerings, and show you what you should do” (I Samuel 9:26-27; 10:1-8).

Moved by God’s Spirit

After Samuel departed, God sent His Spirit to enter Saul’s mind and convert his thinking. His thoughts, attitudes and desires began to change. Saul became a different person.

The young Benjamite and his servant soon arrived at Gibeah, where they were met by a group of prophets. Suddenly, God’s Spirit came upon Saul, causing him to prophesy among the prophets!

Some people who had known Saul for a long time happened to walk by. They were so surprised to see their friend among the prophets that they said to each other, “What’s going on here? Isn’t this Saul, Kish’s son? Why is he speaking and acting as though he is a prophet? How can Saul be a prophet?”

One of the men said, “But who is his father?” From then on, the saying, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” became popular among the people.

After Saul finished prophesying, he went to the place of worship Samuel had told him about. There, Saul met his uncle, who was torn between being angry with his nephew and relieved that he was safe and sound.

Saul’s uncle grabbed him by the shoulders, gave him a big bear hug, and said, “Where have you been? We’ve been worried sick about you!”

“We’ve been out looking for my father’s donkeys,” Saul answered. “When we saw that they were nowhere to be found, we asked the prophet Samuel for help.”

“Really? What did Samuel say to you?”

“He told us that the donkeys had been found.” But, perhaps out of humility, Saul did not reveal what Samuel had said about him being made king over all Israel (I Samuel 10:9-16).

Proclaimed King of Israel

The people of Israel, represented by their tribal elders and clan leaders, obeyed Samuel’s instruction to assemble before God at Mizpeh. When

everyone had arrived, Samuel addressed the assembly, delivering the words of the Eternal God of Israel:

“I brought Israel out of Egypt, and out from the hand of all kingdoms, and from those who oppressed you.

“But you, Israel, were not grateful. You have rejected your God—the One who personally rescued you from all your trials and adversities—and said to Him, ‘No more! We want a king set over us!’

“Therefore, present yourselves before the Eternal by each tribe, and by each clan. Then I will choose for you a king.”

Samuel had all the tribes of Israel come to the altar, one after the other. From among them, God chose the tribe of Benjamin. Next, all the clans of Benjamin came to the altar. From out of these, God chose the clan of Matri. From this clan, God chose the family of Kish. And from Kish’s family, the Eternal chose Saul.

When God’s choice was finally known, the people immediately looked for their new king—but Saul could not be found! Overwhelmed by the weight of instant fame, Saul hid himself. He did not like being the center of attention.

So the Israelites prayerfully turned to God to find out where Saul was.

God answered, “Your new king is hiding behind the military supplies.”

The people rushed over to the stockpile of military supplies and pulled him out of his hiding place. The moment he stood up, the people were in awe: Saul was a head taller than everyone else in the crowd!

Then Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man whom the Eternal has chosen—that there is no one like him among all Israel?”

Saul wanted so desperately to hide, for everyone’s eyes were upon him, impressed by his towering height and good looks.

Suddenly, everyone cheered, “Long live the king!”

When the clamor of shouts began to die out, Samuel addressed the people again. He explained to them the rights, duties and behavior expected of a king:

“The king must not be above God’s laws. All kings of Israel must be Israelites—never foreigners. The king must not collect houses, silver, gold, nor other wealth for his own personal gain. He must not acquire horses and chariots for war, else he will rely upon his own strength and not upon God’s. The king shall have only one wife at a time. And he must take the book of God’s Law and copy it by hand; then the king must read it throughout his time of reign” (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

Saul hides among the military supplies.



Next, Samuel wrote these words in a book, and put the book in a temple building at one of the places where God was worshipped.

The royal coronation was now over, so Samuel sent everyone home. Saul went home, too, to Gibeah. And, inspired by God, a band of valiant men escorted him, eager to serve their new king.

But not everyone was pleased with God's anointed leader. A certain group of accusers and whisperers, whom the Bible calls "the children of Belial," said, "How shall this man save us? What's so special about him?" They despised Saul, and refused to bring gifts to their new king.

But King Saul, who could have had them severely punished, kept silent instead (I Samuel 10:17-27).

King Saul's First Military Campaign

Nahash, king of the neighboring Ammonites, marched his army into Israel and surrounded the town of Jabesh, which was in Gilead, across the Jordan River.

The townspeople were trapped. They did not have enough fighting men and supplies to fend off this new threat. So the elders of Jabesh approached King Nahash and said, “We don’t want any trouble. If you will sign a peace treaty with us, we will serve you—and we’ll even pay you taxes.”

Nahash had them where he wanted them. He simply smiled and said, “Of course I will sign a treaty with you...But not before I put out the right eye of every man who lives in Jabesh.” The king wanted to do this in order to render the archers of Jabesh useless for battle, and to insult the whole land of Israel.

The town leaders replied, “Give us seven days so that we can send messengers throughout Israel and ask for help. If no one comes to our rescue, we will surrender to you.”

Proud of his massive army, King Nahash agreed.

Some of Jabesh’s messengers went to Gibeah, Saul’s hometown and the new royal capital of Israel. They told all who would listen about the trouble that was brewing at Jabesh, which made everyone in Gibeah cry.

Just then, Saul came in from the fields, walking behind his oxen. Even though he was Israel’s new king, Saul continued to work as a farmer. He did not parade around as someone too important to get his hands dirty from hard work.

Saul immediately took note of all the people weeping, and said, “What’s wrong? Why is everyone crying?”

When the people told him the horrible news, the Spirit of God suddenly came upon Saul—and the king of Israel was furious!

Saul killed two of his oxen, cut them up in pieces, and gave them to the messengers. “Show these pieces to everyone in Israel and tell them: ‘Saul and Samuel are assembling an army. Come and join us. If you don’t, this is what will happen to your oxen!’”

God made the Israelites tremble with fear when they received Saul’s sobering message. Then all the Israelites old enough to wage war assembled at Bezek, which was west of the Jordan River, but within striking distance of Jabesh. There, Saul had them organized and counted. He soon discovered that he had 330,000 Israelite warriors ready to take on the king of Ammon.

King Saul and his military officers sent the messengers back to Jabesh with this promise: “By tomorrow afternoon, we will rescue your people.”

Upon receiving Saul’s message, the townspeople of Jabesh were encouraged. So they told King Nahash, “We will surrender to you tomorrow, and then you can do whatever you want with us.”

The next day, Saul divided his army into three groups, which lessened the chance of losing everyone in a sneak attack. It also provided Saul's army greater military options.

The king of Israel and his men attacked the enemy before daylight, when they were least prepared for battle. They made a great slaughter of the Ammonites, keeping up their attack until afternoon. A few Ammonites managed to escape, but they were so scattered that no two of them were left together.

God had blessed Saul with his first military victory!

With the battle finished, the Israelites, and especially the people of Jabesh, were grateful for Saul's heroic and daring leadership.

Saul's soldiers approached Samuel and demanded, "Where are those rebels who mocked Saul and said they didn't want him to be our king? Bring them to us, and we will put them to death!"

"No!" Saul said. "The Eternal rescued Israel today. No one will be put to death."

Samuel said to the Israelites, "Come! It's time we go to Gilgal and make a covenant so that Saul will continue to be the king of Israel." No more were the people of Israel uncertain about whether Saul should be their king (I Samuel 11:1-15).

A Royal Coronation

Everyone went to the place of worship at Gilgal, where they agreed that Saul would be their king. Saul and the people sacrificed animals and asked for God's blessing. Then they had a big celebration, for Israel was united under one king.

Next, Samuel addressed the Israelites:

"I have given you a king, just as you asked. As a judge, I have led you ever since I was a young man. And now I am old; my hair is gray, and my own sons are grown.

"Let me ask this: Have I ever taken anyone's ox or donkey, or forced you to give me anything, or cheated you? Have I ever oppressed anyone or taken a bribe to give an unfair decision? Answer me so that the Eternal and His chosen king can hear you. If I have committed any of these things, I will give it all back."

"No!" The Israelites answered. "You have never cheated us in any way!"

The old prophet said, "God and His anointed king are witnesses to what you have said."

"Yes, we agree," they replied.

Then Samuel said, "God brought your fathers out of Egypt and

chose Moses and Aaron to be your leaders. Now the Eternal will be your Judge. So stand here and listen, while I remind you of how often God has saved you and your fathers from your enemies.

“After Jacob went to Egypt, your fathers cried out to the Eternal for help, and He sent Moses and Aaron. They led your fathers out of Egypt and had them settle in this land. But Israel forgot their God, so He allowed them to be defeated by the Philistines, the king of Moab, and Sisera, commander of Hazor’s army.

“Again your fathers cried out to the Eternal for help. They said, ‘We have sinned! We stopped worshiping You and worshipped Baal and Astarte instead. But now, if You rescue us from our enemies, we will worship You again.’

“So God sent several judges to you—Gideon, Bedan, Jephthah, Samson and others—to deliver you from your enemies, and you no longer needed to worry about being attacked. Then you saw that King Nahash of Ammon was going to attack you. And even though the Eternal your God is your King, you told me, ‘No! This time we want a king to rule over us!’

“You asked for a king, and you chose one. And now he stands here before you. But in reality, it was the Eternal who made this man your king. If you and your new ruler truly want to follow God, then you must truly fear the Eternal and do exactly what He commands. Do not be stubborn! If you rebel against God and refuse to listen to His voice, His hand will be against you and your king, as it was against your fathers.

“Stand, therefore, and watch God show His mighty power. Is this not the wheat harvest? I will call upon the Eternal to send a thunderstorm. When you see this come to pass, then you will know how wrong and wicked you were to ask for a king—only God should be your King!”

Samuel prayed, and God sent a mighty thunderstorm that same day. Everyone was amazed, for it was the dry season, when rain was scarce. This miracle caused Israel to be afraid of both God and Samuel.

They said to the old prophet, “We are your servants! Please, pray to the Eternal your God for us—we don’t want to die! We have added to our sins by asking for a king.”

Samuel told them, “Though what you did was wrong, do not fear. However, make sure that you always worship the Eternal and serve Him with all your heart. Above all, do not worship idols! They don’t have the power to deliver you or profit you in any way. They cannot help you or save you when you’re in trouble.

“Remember that God has chosen you to be His people. He will

always take care of you so that everyone will know how great He truly is. I would be sinning against God if I stopped praying for you! I will always teach you how to live the right way. But you must obey the Eternal—you must worship Him with all your heart and remember the great things He has done for you.

“However,” Samuel warned, “if you and your king refuse, and decide to do evil, God will sweep you all away!”

Every man, woman and child in Israel was sobered by Samuel’s grave warning. Each person told himself that he would do better in putting God first. “Besides,” many reasoned, “now that we have a new king, our lives will improve. What could possibly go wrong?” (I Samuel 12:1-25).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

“REBELLION IS LIKE WITCHCRAFT”

During the first two years of King Saul’s reign over Israel, there was peace. Sadly, however, something tragic began to happen to Saul: The humility he had been known for had been replaced by pride and self-importance. King Saul was headed down a dangerous—and ultimately deadly—path.

Saul wanted to create a special fighting force of expert warriors. So he ordered all of Israel’s able-bodied fighting men to assemble before him. From these troops, he chose 3,000 of the best warriors and formed an elite military team of full-time, professional soldiers. The king had 2,000 of these troops stay with him in the hills near Michmash and Bethel. The other 1,000 were stationed at Gibeah with Saul’s son Jonathan. (As the king’s firstborn son, the young prince was in line to inherit the throne upon Saul’s death.)

One day, Jonathan led his team of warriors to attack a Philistine army outpost at Geba, about one and a half miles from Michmash, across a rugged ravine. Though the outpost was destroyed, the other Philistines heard what happened. And they wanted revenge!

Saul sent messengers to every village in the land. “Give a signal with the trumpet and summon additional troops,” he told them. “When the people assemble, tell them what has happened.”

The messengers did as ordered, telling the people of Israel that Saul had destroyed the Philistine outpost at Geba. “And now the Philistines want revenge against Israel,” they said. “The king orders every town and village throughout Israel to send men to join Saul’s army at Gilgal!”

Meanwhile, the Philistines quickly assembled an army to fight Israel: 3,000 chariots, 6,000 cavalry, and foot soldiers so numerous, they were as grains of sand on a beach. The Philistine army marched to Michmash and encamped east of Beth Aven, which was less than a mile away.

Israelite spies reported to their superiors that the Philistines vastly outnumbered Israel’s army. News of their reports spread throughout the

Israelite camp. The soldiers began to let fear and worry overwhelm their minds.

“We can’t possibly win!” many said. “Those bloodthirsty pagans want revenge—and nothing’s going to stand in their way!”

Hordes of soldiers ran away from camp, some hiding in caves or in thickets, and some running to hide among large rocks. Others hid in tombs or in deep, dry pits. Still others went east and crossed the Jordan River to Gad and Gilead.

But King Saul remained at Gilgal. He, too, began to worry, as many of his elite soldiers, shaking with fear, ran off and abandoned him. The king waited at Gilgal for seven days, just as Samuel had ordered him to do (I Samuel 10:8).

But Samuel did not yet arrive.

Saul did not realize it, but God was testing his character to see whether or not Israel’s first king would obey Him. True character is revealed under pressure, when problems arise. This is why God often tests His servants with trials. He needs to see whether they will trust in Him, or in themselves.

But Saul gave way to impatience and human reasoning. “I can’t believe Samuel’s not here yet,” he said to his officers. “If we wait any longer, I won’t have any men left to fight against the Philistines.”

So the king commanded his men: “Bring me some animals, so we can offer sacrifices to please the Eternal and ask for His help.”

His men did as they were ordered. Then Saul killed one of the animals. In doing so, the king had taken upon himself the sacred duties of a priest, which God did not give him the authority to do. Saul had forgotten that the kings of Israel were not to set themselves above God’s Law. But, with his mind full of fear, vanity and self-importance, Saul deceived himself into believing that he could break God’s commands and somehow make everything turn out for the best. How foolish! Unfortunately, mankind has been learning this lesson the hard way.

Just as Saul placed his sacrifice on the altar, Samuel arrived. Saul, both embarrassed and relieved, went out to welcome him.

“What have you done?” Samuel asked.

Saul said, “My soldiers were leaving in all directions, and you didn’t come when you were supposed to. The Philistines were gathering at Michmash, and I was worried that they would attack me here at Gilgal. A sacrifice needed to be offered to ask for God’s help, but when I saw that you had not yet arrived, I forced myself into offering the sacrifice.”

Saul walked by sight when he should have walked by faith (II Corinthians 5:7). And, instead of taking personal responsibility and admitting his sin, the king tried to shift blame to Samuel.



“That was foolish, Saul!” Samuel said. “You did not obey the Eternal your God.” God expects His leaders to fear and obey Him, even in the smallest matters. If they do, God will know that He can trust them with larger responsibilities.

The prophet said, “If you had kept God’s commandment, your dynasty would have been established. Someone from your family line would always have been king of Israel. But no, you chose to disobey. Therefore, the Eternal will not choose anyone from your family or descendants to be king. Instead, God has sought for Himself a man after His own heart. This man will be the next leader of His people.”

Saul’s sin of disobedience affected him and his descendants. This account is an example of how one man’s sin affects not just the sinner, but also the lives of future generations.

Disappointed with Saul, Samuel departed (I Samuel 13:1-15).

The Philistines Gain the Upper Hand

Saul gathered the soldiers who had not deserted him, and led them to Gibeah, a ten-mile trip westward. There, they joined up with his other troops. When he counted them, the king found that he only had 600 men. Then he, Jonathan, and their army set up camp at Geba in Benjamin.

Meanwhile, the Philistine army was still camped at Michmash. Each day, the Philistines sent out three companies of raiding patrols to attack and plunder villages, and then destroy them. Their plan was to demoralize the Israelites—not face them in battle. One patrol went north along the road to Ophrah, in the region of Shual. Another patrol went west along the road to Beth Horon. A third patrol went east toward the desert on the road to the ridge that overlooks the Valley of Zeboim, which was east toward the Jordan Valley.

In the heat of their constant raids, the Philistines would not allow any of the Israelites to be blacksmiths—metal-working craftsmen who made iron tools.

“If we allowed those worthless Israelites to make swords and spears,” they reasoned, “we would no longer have the upper hand.”

Whenever the Israelites wanted to sharpen their cattle prods, plowblades, picks, axes, sickles, and pitchforks, they had to go to the Philistines. And the Philistines charged high prices.

As a result, whenever the Israelite soldiers went into battle, none of them had a sword or a spear, except Saul and Jonathan. They only had slingshots, and bows and arrows—which were ineffective in hand-to-hand combat.

Possessing superior weapons—and the means to make them—gave the Philistines the upper hand in battle (I Samuel 13:15-22).

Jonathan Takes on the Philistines

The Philistines moved their camp to a pass leading to Michmash, while Saul was in Gibeah with his 600 men. There, Saul had his tent set up under a pomegranate tree, where he held court by a threshing place at the edge of town.

A man named Ahijah was serving as the priest for Israel's army. One of his duties was to wear the sacred ephod and get answers from God for Saul. Ahijah was the grandson of Phinehas, and great-grandson of Eli, who had been God's high priest at Shiloh.

One day, Jonathan, acting on God's promise (I Samuel 9:16), told his armor bearer, "I need your help for a dangerous mission. I want to attack the Philistine garrison at the other side of the valley. But I don't want anyone to see us leaving—not even my father. Will you come with me?"

The armor bearer nodded, and the two brave men slipped out of camp without anyone noticing.

Jonathan decided to get to the garrison by going through the pass that led between two sharp rocks, with Michmash to the north and Gibeah to the south. As they journeyed toward their destination, the young prince and his armor bearer talked.

"It's just the two of us against all those godless pagans," Jonathan said. "But the Eternal can help just a few soldiers win a battle just as easily as He can help a whole army. Perhaps God will help us." Jonathan was walking by faith.

The armor bearer said, "Do all that's in your heart. I'll be right there with you, backing you up."

"Then this is what we will do," Jonathan said. "We will go across and let the Philistines see us. If they agree to come down the hill and fight where we are, then we won't climb up to their camp. But if they tell us to come up the hill and fight, then we will go up. This will be a sign that the Eternal will deliver these bloodthirsty pagans into our hands."

Jonathan and the soldier stood at the bottom of the hill where the Philistines could see them. The Philistines said, "Look! Those worthless Israelites have crawled out of their holes!"

Then they yelled down to Jonathan and the armor bearer: "Come up here, you dogs! We'll teach you something you'll never forget!"

Jonathan turned to the soldier and said, "Follow me! The Eternal is going to give us the victory!" Then Jonathan crawled up the hillside, with his armor bearer right behind him.

When they got to the top, the prince and the armor bearer held up their shields and swords. With their backs turned to each other, Jonathan killed the Philistines who attacked from the front, while his armor bearer killed those who attacked from behind. Before they had gone far, the two Israelite warriors had killed about 20 Philistines!

Suddenly, the whole Philistine army panicked—those in the garrison, those on guard duty, those in the fields, and those on raiding patrols. All of them were frightened and confused. Then God sent an earthquake, causing the ground to tremble.

From Gibeah, Saul's watchmen told him that the Philistine army was running in every direction, like melted wax.

Saul said, "Some of my men must have taken matters into their own hands." He ordered his officers to assemble the men and find out who left their camp. When the roll call was finished, they discovered that Jonathan and his armor bearer were missing.

Then Saul looked over to Ahijah and barked, "Come over here! Let's ask God what we should do."

But, just as the king had finished speaking, the noise coming from the Philistine garrison became more and more confused. So he said to the priest, "Never mind." Ultimately, Saul decided to rely on his own counsel. He had tossed away an opportunity to seek God's will. This was just another example of how stubborn and unrepentant Saul was becoming.

Saul quickly called his army together and led them to the Philistine garrison. By then, the Philistines were so confused, they were killing each other! And some of their hired soldiers even switched to Israel's side and fought for Saul and Jonathan!

Meanwhile, many Israelites had been hiding in the mountains of Ephraim, north and west of Michmash. When they heard that the Philistines were on the run, the Israelites came out of hiding and joined in the chase.

God saved Israel that day, giving His people victory in battle (I Samuel 13:23; 14:1-23).

A Rash Vow

Earlier, Saul had told his soldiers that he wanted to get even with the Philistines by sunset. "If any of you men eat before then, you will be under a curse!" Then the king made them swear not to eat.

Saul's vow was rash and unwise. It kept his soldiers from regaining their strength, and made them unprepared for the hard, sweaty work of battle.

Besides this, Saul's fast was done in vain. He was not denying himself food and drink in order to focus on loosing "the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke," according to God's will (Isaiah 58:3-12). Saul was only seeking to advance his own will. He was far more concerned with avenging himself than in bringing honor to God in battle and protecting Israel.

By the time the fighting moved past Beth Aven, the Israelite troops were weak from hunger. The army went into a forest, and came to a place where honey was dripping on the ground. But no one ate any of it, because they were afraid of being put under Saul's curse.

However, Jonathan did not know about his father's warning. So he dipped the end of his walking stick in the honey and ate some with his fingers. Immediately, he felt stronger and more alert.

A soldier told the prince, "Your father swore that anyone who ate food today would be put under a curse. He had us agree to his vow. That is why we're so weak."

Jonathan realized that Saul's vow was hurting the men, not helping them. He said, "My father has caused you a lot of trouble. Look at me! I only tasted a little of this honey, but already I feel strong and alert. We all would have been better off eating some of the food that the Philistines had left behind. We would have the energy to slay a lot more of them."

By evening, Israel's army was exhausted from killing the enemy from Michmash to Aijalon, which was about 15 miles westward, near Philistine territory. They grabbed the food they had captured from their enemy and started eating. They even killed sheep, cows and calves right on the ground and ate the meat without draining the blood! In doing so, they violated God's Law (Leviticus 17:10-14).

A soldier told Saul, "Look! The army is disobeying the Eternal by eating meat before the blood drains out."

"You're right," Saul said. "They are being unfaithful to God! Hurry! Roll a big rock over to me. Then tell every soldier in camp to bring their cattle and lambs and kill them on this rock—only then can they eat the meat. That way, no one will disobey the Eternal by eating meat with blood still in it."

That night, the soldiers brought their animals over to the big rock and killed them there. This was the first altar Saul had built for offering sacrifices to the Eternal.

Now that his troops were satisfied and their bellies were full, the king said to them, "We will attack the Philistines again while it is still dark and fight them all night, if need be. We'll slaughter them and take everything they own!"



Unaware of his father's vow,
Jonathan ate the honey.

The soldiers answered, "We will do whatever you want."

But Ahijah said. "Wait! Let's ask God what we should do."

Saul had grown used to making decisions without God's counsel and direction. Reluctantly, he asked God, "Should I attack the Philistines? Will you help us win?"

God did not answer.

Saul gathered his officers to his tent and said, "Someone in this camp has sinned! We must find out what sin has kept the Eternal from answering."

Saul lacked wisdom, a result of rebelling against God's will. So the king blurted out another foolish oath: "I swear by the living God that whoever sinned must die, even if it turns out to be my own son Jonathan."

This time, no one said a word.

The king ordered his army to stand on one side of Ahijah the priest, while Saul and Jonathan stood on the other side. Everyone agreed.

Then Saul had lots cast, and prayed, asking God why He did not answer him. "Please show us who sinned, God. Was it my son Jonathan and me—or was it Your army?"

The answer came back that Jonathan or Saul had sinned, not the army.

Saul told Ahijah, "Now ask God to decide between Jonathan and me." God's answer was that Jonathan had sinned.

"Jonathan," Saul said, "tell me what you have done!"

"I only ate a little honey with the end of my walking stick. Because of your vow, you say I have to die!"

"Yes, Jonathan. I swore to God that you must die."

"No!" all the soldiers shouted. "God helped your son win the battle for us. We will not let you kill him, Saul. As the Eternal lives, we will not let you kill him or even let one hair on his head fall to the ground!"

The king's men realized that it was Jonathan's faith in God that led to their victory—not Saul's foolish vows. So the army kept Saul from killing the prince.

Ever mindful of what others thought of him, Saul gave in to his soldiers' demand and let his son live. Then, he and his men returned home from hunting down the Philistines, who had retreated back to their own territory.

As Israel's king, Saul fought against several enemies—the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the kings of Zobah, the Philistines, and the Amalekites—who had all been attacking and plundering the Israelites. Saul's military campaigns stopped their thievery and attacks, and expanded Israel's borders in all directions: South to Edom, east to Ammon and Moab, north to Zobah, and west to Philistia.

Part of Saul's success was due to the brilliant leadership of his cousin Abner, the king's commanding general over Israel's army.

Saul was at war with the Philistines until the day he died. And whenever he found skilled warriors or valiant men, Saul drafted them into his special force of elite soldiers—just as God had warned (I Samuel 14:24-52).

The Penalty for Disobedience

One day, Samuel visited Saul and reminded him that God had chosen him to be king over His people. Then Samuel gave the king God's message:

“When the Israelites came up out of Egypt, the people of Amalek ambushed them. I am the Eternal Almighty, and now I am going to make Amalek pay for their treachery!

Now go and attack the Amalekites! Utterly destroy them and all their possessions. Kill all their men, women, children, and even their babies—do not spare any of them. And slaughter their cattle, sheep, camels, and donkeys, too.”

The Amalekites were nomads who wandered the desert, plundering the weak and defenseless. As descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, the Amalekites harbored hatred for the Israelites, which exists even to this day. However, this feud will dramatically change once Jesus Christ returns to set up the kingdom of God on earth. Only then will people and nations learn to truly live together in lasting peace and harmony.

Though God had removed the possibility of Saul's descendants ruling over Israel, He still wanted to give the king a chance to prove himself. He was testing Saul's character, giving him the opportunity to put God first through obedience. God does not want any of His servants to fail.

Saul sent messengers to every town and village in Israel, calling for men to join his army at Telaim. In all, 210,000 troops assembled. Saul organized them, and then led them to a valley near one of the towns in Amalek, where they got ready to launch a surprise attack.

The king found out that there were Kenites living nearby. They were descendants of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, and were allowed to live among the Israelites in peace. God even permitted them to inherit a small portion of the Promised Land.

Saul told the Kenites, “Your people were kind to our nation when we left Egypt, so heed my warning. I don't want you to get killed when I wipe out these Amalekites. You must leave this place and stay away from them, lest I destroy you with them.”

Grateful for the warning, the Kenites quickly departed.

Saul attacked the Amalekites throughout much of their territory, from Havilah to Shur, just east of Egypt. Eventually, every Amalekite they could find was killed, except King Agag.

Deliberately disobeying God, Saul and his army captured King Agag alive and decided to let him live. They also spared the best of the

Amalekite's sheep and cattle. They failed to destroy anything of value, killing only animals that were worthless or weak. Driven by lust and greed, Saul failed God's test.

God saw Israel's sin. He told Samuel, "Saul has stopped obeying Me. I regret that I ever made him king."

Samuel was angry at Saul for his foolishness. The old prophet also grieved, and prayerfully cried out to God all that night. He was deeply concerned for Saul and Israel. It hurt him to see Saul destroying his own future.

Early the next morning, he went to talk with Saul. When he could not find him, someone told Samuel that the king went to Carmel, which was about seven miles south of Hebron.

"Why did he go there?" the prophet asked.

"To have a monument built so that everyone would remember his victory. Then the king left for Gilgal."

Samuel shook his head in disgust. He realized that the monument was meant to glorify Saul rather than God.

The old prophet sighed, and thought to himself, "Saul used to be so humble and teachable. But now he likes being the center of attention. He's taking credit for God's victory instead of pointing the people to the Eternal."

When Samuel finally caught up with Saul, the king smiled, and spread his arms in a show of friendship. But Samuel did not smile.

Taking note of this, the king cleared his throat, and then told the prophet, "I hope the Eternal will bless you! I have done what God has commanded me."

"Then why," Samuel asked, controlling his growing anger, "do I hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle?"

"Well, I, uh, I mean, the army took them from the Amalekites," Saul explained. "They kept the best sheep and cattle so that they could sacrifice them to the Eternal your God. But we destroyed everything else."

A guilty conscience kept the king from claiming the Eternal as his God. Sadly, it did not stop him from blaming others for his sin.

"Stop!" Samuel said. "Let me tell you what God told me last night."

"Speak on."

"When you were little in your own eyes and did not think you were important, the Eternal chose you to be Israel's king. Today, you are in charge of the tribes of Israel because of Him. When God commanded you to totally wipe out those worthless Amalekites, you didn't listen—why? Why did you keep the animals of our enemy and make God angry? Why did you do this evil, Saul?"

“But I did obey the Eternal!” Saul lied. “He sent me on a mission, and I went. I captured King Agag and destroyed his nation. All the animals were going to be destroyed anyway, so why not let the army take the best sheep and cattle to Gilgal as sacrifices to the Eternal your God?”

Saul simply did not get it. Rather than confessing, he stubbornly continued to justify himself.

“Tell me,” Samuel said. “Does God really take delight in burnt offerings and animal sacrifices? No! Giving sacrifices was never meant to replace obedience to God. The Eternal does not want your sacrifices—He wants you to obey Him! To obey His voice is better than sacrifice, and to listen to Him is better than the fat of rams. Rebellion is just as evil as the sin of witchcraft, and pride is just as wicked as worshiping idols. You have become just like all the pagan kings—self-centered, self-willed, and utterly disobedient to God. Saul, you have forgotten that it is God who gives the victory in battle. Since you have rejected the word of the Eternal, God has rejected you from being king over Israel!”

“I have sinned,” Saul admitted. “I disobeyed both you and God. I was afraid of the people, and listened to them instead. Please pardon my sin and return with me so I can worship the Eternal.”

The king was more concerned with having Samuel’s support before the people than in truly repenting. Saul wanted to please people, not God.

“No!” Samuel replied, “You rebelled against God, and I will not go back with you and continue to acknowledge you as Israel’s ruler. The Eternal has declared that you cannot be king of Israel any longer.”

The prophet knew that Saul was not expressing true repentance. The word *repent* means “change”—and Saul did not show that he was willing to change his life from the path of selfishness and disobedience. He was sorry about the penalties of his sin, not about the sin itself. He was still justifying himself and blaming others when he should have feared God.

Saul could not bear to humble himself and accept Samuel’s answer. As the old prophet turned to leave, Saul grabbed the edge of Samuel’s robe—and it tore!

Saul stood there with the torn piece of fabric in his hand. He trembled, wondering what would happen to him for showing such disrespect to Samuel’s office.

The prophet said, “The Eternal has torn the kingdom of Israel away from you today, Saul, and He will give it to someone better



Saul tears
Samuel's robe.

than you. And remember this: The Eternal God of Israel is not a human being; He does not tell lies nor change His mind.”

Saul said, “I did sin, but please honor me in front of the leaders of my army and the people of Israel. Please return with me so I can worship the Eternal your God.”

He was still thinking of himself, worrying about maintaining his power and reputation. True repentance would have led Saul to set things right with God.

Reluctantly, Samuel returned with the king, and Saul worshiped God. But Samuel did not go with him to give Saul honor; he went to carry out the assignment that Saul had neglected to perform.

Samuel shouted to the troops, “Bring me Agag, king of Amalek!”

Agag was brought before him in chains. Amalek’s king thought, “They haven’t killed me yet. Surely they won’t kill me now.”

But Samuel, as Israel’s judge, pronounced divine sentence upon this sinner: “Agag, you have snatched children from their mothers’ arms and killed them. Now, therefore, your mother will be without children.”

Samuel took a sharp sword, raised it above his head, and hacked

King Agag to pieces at the place of worship. God's righteous judgment had finally been carried out.

Afterward, Samuel went home to Ramah, while Saul returned to his home in Gibeah. The old prophet mourned for Saul as though Israel's king was dead. Though he loved and cared for him, Samuel knew he had to support God's decision to reject Saul. This meant that he could not stay in contact with him.

Samuel never saw the king again (I Samuel 51:1-35).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

DAVID VERSUS GOLIATH

God was sorry that He had ever made Saul king of Israel. He said to Samuel, “How long will you continue to mourn for Saul, seeing that I have rejected him? He shall no longer be king, so stop feeling sorry for him.

“Now put some olive oil in a small jar, depart from Ramah, and go visit a man named Jesse, who lives in Bethlehem. I have provided Myself a king from among his sons.”

Samuel said, “If I do that, Saul will find out and have me killed.” The route between Ramah and Bethlehem would take him straight through Gibeah, Saul’s hometown.

“Take a calf with you,” God said. “Tell everyone that you have come to offer it as a sacrifice to Me. Then invite Jesse to the sacrifice. I will show you which one of his sons I have chosen to be king; then you will anoint him with the olive oil.”

Samuel did as God had commanded and went to Bethlehem.

News of the prophet’s arrival brought town leaders out to meet him, but they were also terribly frightened.

They asked, “Is this a friendly visit?” They had heard about Samuel personally executing King Agag. They were afraid that the man of God might pronounce some judgment against their town.

“Yes, it is,” Samuel said. “I’ve come to offer a sacrifice to the Eternal. Get yourself ready to take part in the sacrifice and come with me.”

By this, they knew that he expected them to sanctify themselves by washing their bodies, putting on clean clothes, and preparing their minds through meditation and prayer (Leviticus 15; Numbers 19:11-22; Exodus 19:10, 14).

Samuel also invited Jesse and his sons to come to the sacrifice, getting them ready to take part. When they all arrived, Samuel immediately noticed Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab.

Impressed by his outward appearance, Samuel said to himself, “Surely, he has to be the one the Eternal has chosen.”

But God said to him, “Do not judge him by his height and beauty. His appearance does not impress Me. Eliab is not the one I have cho-

sen. People judge others by what they look like—but I judge people by what is in their hearts!”

Jesse told his son Abinadab to go over to Samuel, but the prophet said, “No, the Eternal has not chosen this man.”

Next, Jesse sent over his son Shammah. But Samuel said, “God has not chosen this man either.”

Eventually, Jesse had all seven of his oldest sons present themselves to Samuel. Finally, Samuel said, “Jesse, God has not chosen any of these young men. Do you have any more sons?”

“Yes,” Jesse slowly answered. “My youngest son is David. He’s outside taking care of the sheep.”

“Send for him!” Samuel said. “We will not start the ceremony until he gets here.”

So Jesse sent for the lad.

David was a healthy, ruddy, good-looking boy who had a twinkle in his eyes. As soon as he came over, God said to Samuel, “He is the one. Get up and anoint him with the olive oil.”

God wanted a shepherd to be His king, someone who was used to caring for the weak and protecting the defenseless.

Samuel quickly obeyed, pouring the oil on David’s head as his brothers watched. At that moment, God’s Spirit came upon David. If the lad continued to walk in all of God’s ways, the Holy Spirit would convert David’s mind for the rest of his life. It would enhance his natural abilities and talents, and help him to think from God’s perspective.

David’s small circle of witnesses would later provide proof that God had used Samuel to officially anoint him. In this way, David would not be seen as a rebel trying to seize Saul’s throne.

After the ceremony, Samuel returned home to Ramah (I Samuel 16:1-13).

Saul Loses God’s Spirit

Saul continued in his proud and rebellious ways, cutting himself off from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). This left the Eternal with no other choice but to stop working with Saul. God then allowed an evil spirit to trouble Saul’s mind, leaving him terrified.

His counselors and officials told him, “It’s an evil spirit from God that’s frightening you.”

“My lord, we should search for someone who is good at playing the harp. Whenever this evil spirit bothers you, this man can play soothing music for you and you’ll feel much better.”

“Very well,” Saul muttered. “Find me someone right away and bring him here.”

One official had heard of David. “He’s the son of a man named Jesse,” he explained, “who lives in Bethlehem. David can play the harp. Plus, he’s a brave warrior, as well as good-looking, and excellent in speech. The Eternal is definitely with him.”

As David continued to follow God with all his heart, he produced a wonderful example that others quickly noticed, just like Samuel when he was growing up (I Samuel 2:26).

Saul sent a message to Jesse, telling him to send David to serve at the king’s court. Jesse dutifully obeyed. He loaded a donkey with bread and a goatskin full of wine. Then he told David to take the animal, along with a young goat, to Saul.

Upon arriving, Saul immediately put David to work. The king came to like the lad’s personality and abilities so much that he put David in charge of carrying his weapons. Saul even sent another message to Jesse, which said, “You have raised a wonderful boy. Please let him stay with me.”

Whenever Saul’s mind was troubled by the evil spirit, David would play his harp. Then the king would relax and feel better, and the evil spirit would go away.

God brought about this event to bring David to Saul’s royal court and train him to become a king (just as Moses had been trained for leadership as a prince of Egypt in Pharaoh’s court). Little did King Saul suspect that the man God had chosen to replace him as Israel’s next ruler was close at hand. (I Samuel 16:14-23).

A Giant Defies the Army of God

The Philistines were on the warpath again, and sent troops to attack the town of Sochoh, which was about 15 miles from Bethlehem. Then they encamped at Ephes Dammim, between Sochoh and Azekah.

About three miles away, King Saul and his army set up camp on a hill overlooking the Valley of Elah, and prepared to fight the enemy, who was on a hill on the other side of the valley.

The Philistines had a fierce champion among them, a giant named Goliath, who came from the town of Gath. Towering at more than nine feet tall, Goliath wore a bronze helmet, and bronze armor—plates of brass overlapping like scales on a fish—to protect his chest and legs. The chest armor alone weighed about 125 pounds! He carried a bronze sword strapped on his back. He also had a spear so big

that the iron spearhead alone weighed more than fifteen pounds. Whenever he went out to do battle, Goliath always had a soldier walk before him to carry his shield. To all who saw him, this Philistine giant seemed invincible—and he was Israel’s worst nightmare.

Goliath marched out onto the battlefield and shouted to the army of Israel: “Why are you lining up for battle? I’m the best soldier in my army, and all of you are in Saul’s army. Choose your best soldier, and let him come out to fight me! If he can slay me, our people will be your slaves. But if I slay him, your people will be our slaves. I challenge the whole army of Israel! Choose someone to fight me!”

Saul and his men heard what Goliath said, but every soldier among the Israelites was so frightened, they could not gather enough courage to act. For the next 40 days, Goliath came out every morning and every evening, challenging the Israelites to send out a champion.

David Takes on Goliath!

Now, three of David’s oldest brothers—Eliab, Abinadab and Shamamah—were stationed among Saul’s troops.

Meanwhile, David stayed behind in Bethlehem to take care of his father’s sheep while they were away (I Samuel 17:15). Often, the lad traveled back and forth between home and Saul’s camp to bring his brother’s much-needed supplies.

One day, Jesse told David to take a sack of roasted grain and ten loaves of bread to his brothers. “And here are ten large chunks of cheese to take to their commanding officer. Find out how your brothers are doing and bring back some news that they are all right.”

David obeyed. He got up early the next morning and left someone else in charge of the sheep. Then he loaded the supplies and started off for the Valley of Elah.

He reached Israel’s camp just as the soldiers were taking their places and shouting the battle cry. The armies of Israel and the Philistines lined up on opposite sides of the valley, facing each other. Leaving his things with the man in charge of supplies, David ran up to the battle line to ask his brothers if they were well.

While David was talking with them, Goliath marched out onto the battlefield and started boasting as usual. David could hardly believe his own ears.

David asked some soldiers standing nearby, “What will a man get for killing this Philistine and stopping him from insulting our people? Who does that worthless Philistine think he is? He’s defying the army of the living God!”

The soldiers told him, “King Saul is offering a big reward to the man who kills Goliath. That man will even get to marry the king’s daughter, and no one in his family will ever have to pay taxes again.”

Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him talking with the soldiers—and he was angry at him (perhaps he was still jealous at being passed over for kingship). He said, “What are you doing here? Who’s taking care of our little flock of sheep out in the wilderness? You’re nothing but a spoiled brat! You came here just to watch the fighting, didn’t you?”

“What have I done?” David said. “Can’t I even ask a question?”

Then David asked another soldier the same thing he had asked the others. He received the same answer.

Some soldiers overheard David talking, so they told Saul, who sent for the lad.

“My lord,” David said to him, “this Philistine shouldn’t be allowed to turn us into cowards. I will go out and fight him myself!”

“You don’t have a prayer against him, son,” Saul replied. “You’re just a lad, while Goliath has been a professional soldier all his life.”

But David said, “My lord, I am a shepherd of my father’s sheep. When one of them is dragged off by a lion or a bear, I go after it and beat the wild animal until it lets the sheep go. If the wild animal turns and attacks me, I grab it by the neck and kill it. Sir, I have killed lions and bears that way, and I can certainly kill this worthless Philistine, too. Besides, he should not have defied the army of the living God!”

Like Jonathan (I Samuel 41:6), David had the kind of faith to take on the impossible. “The Eternal has rescued me from the claws of lions and bears, and He will keep me safe from the hands of this Philistine.”

“All right then,” Saul said, “go ahead and fight him. And may the Eternal be with you!”

Saul had his own military garments and armor put on David, and he gave him a bronze helmet to wear. David strapped on a sword and tried to walk around, but he said, “I can’t move around with all of this on me. I’m not used to it.”

So David took off Saul’s armor and picked up his shepherd’s rod, a 30-inch long wooden rod that had a knob at one end. He then went out to a stream and picked up five round smooth rocks, a little larger than baseballs. In the hands of an expert, these rocks could be hurled at close to 100 miles per hour! David put them in his leather bag, then, with his sling in his hand, he went straight toward Goliath.

Because he had been faithfully obeying God, David knew that the Eternal would not abandon him.

Goliath was surprised to see a champion from Israel coming out to fight. But when the nine-foot-tall giant saw that David was only a boy, he insulted him.

“What do you think I am—a dog?” Goliath asked. “Is that why you’ve come after me with a stick?”

David was used to driving away wild dogs that tried to attack his sheep. To him, Goliath was no better.

The giant cursed David in the name of the false Philistine gods. He shouted, “Come on, then, boy! When I’m finished with you, I’ll feed what’s left of your body to the birds and wild animals!”

Boldly, David answered, “You have come out to fight me with a sword and a spear and dagger. But I have come to fight you in the name of the Eternal Almighty. He is the God of Israel’s army, and you have insulted Him too! Today, the Eternal will deliver you into my hand. I will strike you down and cut off your head. Then I will feed the bodies of your fellow soldiers to the birds and wild animals. The whole world will know that Israel’s God is real—unlike your false gods. Everyone here will see that the Eternal does not need swords or spears to save His people. For this is God’s battle—and He always wins!”

David saw the “big picture”: The Philistines were not fighting just against Israel. They were actually fighting against the Supreme God of the universe—a fight they could never win!

Goliath came to do battle in his own name, to bring honor and glory to himself. David represented the government of God. His confidence was in the Eternal—not in his own human abilities.

When Goliath started forward, David ran toward him, put a rock in his sling and swung the sling around by its straps. As he let go of one strap, the rock flew out and smashed Goliath on the forehead, cracking his skull. The Philistine giant fell facedown on the earth—Goliath was dead!

David rushed over, pulled out Goliath’s sword, and used it to cut off the giant’s head. When the Philistines



David rushes toward Goliath.

saw what had happened to their champion, they bolted. They did not honor their slain champion's terms.

But the soldiers of Israel let out a battle cry and chased after them, pursuing as far as the Philistine cities of Gath and Ekron. The bodies of the enemy were scattered all along the road.



Goliath stands defiant.

Upon returning to camp, the Israelites took whatever they desired from the enemy camp.

Saul had watched as David went out to fight the giant. The king asked Abner, "Who is that young man?" Because his duty at the royal court turned out to be only temporary, David had been away from Saul for some time, during which the lad's appearance had changed as he grew up. Saul no longer recognized him.

“I have no idea.”

“Find out! I want to know whose son this young man is.”

David came back from fighting Goliath, carrying Goliath’s head (which he later took to Jerusalem).

Abner took David to Saul. The king asked the lad, “Who are you?”

David reminded him who he was.

From that moment on, Saul permanently kept David in his service and would not let him go back to his own family (I Samuel 17:12-58; 18:2).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

THE MEANING OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP

Now that Goliath was dead and the battle over, the victorious Israelite army set out for home. As the troops marched along, women came out of each Israelite town and welcomed King Saul. They sang cheerful songs and danced to the music of harps, tambourines and other musical instruments.

Saul smiled and waved as the women sang, “Saul has killed 1,000 enemies!” The king was pleased to have so much attention.

Then they sang, “And David has killed 10,000 enemies!”

Saul stopped smiling. He instantly became jealous and angry. He thought, “They have the nerve to say that David has killed ten times more enemies than I ever did. The next thing you know, they will want to make him king!”

The king began to see David as a personal threat—even suspecting that this might be God’s chosen replacement. From then on, Saul never trusted David.

Jonathan, on the other hand, quickly realized that he and David shared common goals: They both faithfully obeyed God and put His will first. As a result, Jonathan and David became best friends. The heat of battle had taught Jonathan to trust his life with friends, when he and his armor bearer fought the Philistines, protecting each other’s back and working together as a team. And so, the prince trusted in David, caring for his friend as much as Jonathan cared for himself. They became so loyal to each other that they promised to never let anything come between their friendship.

Jonathan realized that David was the man whom God had chosen to replace Saul as king. So the prince removed his royal robe and gave it to David as a sign of friendship. He also gave him his military garments, his sword, his bow and arrows, and his belt. In doing this, Jonathan was removing the things that symbolized being a prince and Saul’s heir, and acknowledging David as Israel’s next king. Jonathan, a wise and popular military leader of noble character, had the potential to become a wonderful ruler. But he humbly stepped aside to support David, his friend.

Meanwhile, God again permitted an evil spirit to take control of Saul. The demon caused the king to act and speak like a raving madman! David came to play the harp for Saul as usual, hoping to soothe the king's mind with soft, melodic music.

As David continued to play, Saul had a spear in his hand.

The king thought, "I'll pin David to the wall! Then I won't have to deal with his presence!" He threw the spear at David twice, but—thanks to God's intervention—the young man dodged and escaped both times.

Saul grew more afraid of David, since it was clear that God was with the son of Jesse.

But God was no longer with Saul (I Samuel 18:1-12).

Going Above and Beyond

The king was so frightened of David that he decided to remove him from his court. He put David in charge of 1,000 soldiers and sent him out to fight, hoping that David would be killed in battle. But God used these fights as opportunities to exalt David in the eyes of the people. God blessed David and his men with victory upon victory; He made sure that they always won their battles.

And this made Saul even more afraid of David.

However, since David was so successful in every mission Saul gave him, the king reluctantly made him a high officer in Israel's army. This pleased everyone, including Saul's other officers. Everyone else in Judah and Israel came to be loyal to David due to his wise leadership and triumphs in battle.

One day, Saul, appealing to David's desire to serve God, proposed that he take on a dangerous mission. He told him, "If you will be brave for me and valiantly fight the Eternal's battles, I will let you marry Merab, my oldest daughter."

But Saul was really thinking, "I dare not kill David myself. That would only upset the people and turn them against me. I'll let the Philistines kill David for me."

David said, "How could I possibly marry your daughter? Who am I and what is my life? I'm not important, and neither is my family."

When Goliath had mocked and defied God and the army of Israel, Saul had promised his daughter's hand in marriage to the one who would kill the Philistine giant. But even though David slew Goliath, Saul did not fulfill his promise.

Therefore, David was not surprised that even though he had successfully completed the king's proposed mission, Saul went back on his

word and gave his daughter Merab to someone else to marry.

Saul still wanted to get rid of David. So he was happy to learn that his other daughter, Michal, was in love with David. The king thought, "I'll offer Michal as bait. I'll propose a virtually impossible mission to David in exchange for marrying Michal. This time, the Philistines will kill him!"

He said to him, "David, my friend, I'm going to give you a second chance to marry one of my daughters and become my son-in-law."

David hesitated before saying anything. He knew that Saul was not trustworthy. He respectfully said, "Thank you for looking kindly upon me, my lord. You have given me much to consider."

Saul was surprised that David did not jump on the chance to marry Michal. So he ordered his assistants to speak to David in private.

Pretending to be his friends, they approached David and said, "Look, the king takes great pleasure in you, and all of his assistants are loyal to you. Why not ask the king if you can marry his daughter Michal? Not many men are given a second chance to become Saul's son-in-law. Think of all the power and fame you would receive. Plus, you would truly be a prince of Israel!"

But David said, "How can I marry Princess Michal? I'm neither rich nor famous!" Despite all of his triumphs and his desire for Michal to be his wife, David did not feel worthy to marry into royalty. David had humility.

The assistant went back to Saul and told him exactly what was said. The king was not pleased.

Still hoping to find a way for the Philistines to kill David, Saul had his assistants tell David that the king did not want a dowry of silver or gold. "He only wants to get even with his enemies," they whispered into David's ear. "All you have to do is bring back proof that you have killed 100 Philistines! Cut off certain private parts of the enemy—only then will we know that they are really dead."

The king's scheme was to expose David to extreme and deadly danger. In his stubbornness, Saul desperately tried to work against God's plan.

Saul's offer pleased David, and he set off on his mission. David gathered his men, saying, "We must hurry! The king has set a time limit. We must finish our mission and get back before time runs out. Only then will I have Michal as my wife."

The soldiers shouted, "Don't worry, David, we're right behind you!"

They soon returned with proof that they had killed 200 Philistines—going above and beyond what Saul had demanded. Full of



burning zeal, David was not an “unprofitable servant” (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 17:7-10)—someone who only does what is expected of him and nothing more. Israel’s future king took on all his tasks wholeheartedly.

Defeated once more, Saul reluctantly agreed to let David marry his daughter. During the wedding, the king thought, “David is now a part of my family, and one step closer to seizing my throne. I know that God is moving to replace me with David, and it’s just not fair!”

Saul became even more afraid of David, and became David’s enemy for the rest of his life (I Samuel 18:13-29).

Jonathan Sticks Up for His Friend

The leaders of the Philistines kept coming to fight Israel, but whenever David faced them in battle, he always won. This made him more famous than any of Saul’s other officers.

It also made the king even more jealous of David!

Boiling with rage, Saul no longer bothered to hide his hatred for him. So, one day, he ordered Jonathan and his officers to kill David.

But the prince loved David more than a brother, so he warned him, “My father is trying to have you killed, David, so be on your guard.”

“But what have I done?”

“You have done nothing but good,” Jonathan assured him. “Therefore, God will protect you. Hide in the field tomorrow morning, and I will bring my father there. Then I’ll talk to him about you. I’ll reason with my father and hopefully help him see past his bitterness and envy. If I find out anything, I’ll let you know.”

David agreed.

The next morning in the field, Jonathan reminded Saul about the many good things David had done for him.

The king said, “Yes, I see your point, son. David has benefited me and Israel a great deal.”

“Then why, father, do you want to kill David? He hasn’t done anything to you—he has done nothing to deserve death. David has served in your army and has always done what’s best for you. He even risked his life to kill Goliath. The Eternal helped Israel win a great victory that day, and it made you happy. If you cause innocent blood to spill, tragic things will fall upon all Israel.”

Saul agreed. He even promised, “As the Eternal lives, David shall not be killed.”

Jonathan called to David and told him what Saul had said. David understood that, without God’s Spirit working within Saul, the king’s mind was unsound and unbalanced. Saul’s promises were worthless.

Yet, walking by faith, David allowed Jonathan to bring him to the king, and Saul allowed David to serve in his army, as he had done before.

The next time the Philistines waged war against Israel, David fought hard and forced them to retreat (I Samuel 18:30; 19:1-8).

David Runs for His Life

One night, David was in Saul’s home, playing the harp for the king. As Saul sat there holding his spear,



he dwelled on David's many successes. He allowed all the jealousy, envy and bitterness he felt toward David to boil within his dark mind.

Suddenly, an evil spirit took control of him. In a fit of violent rage, Saul sprang to his feet and tried to pin David to the wall with the spear!

But God intervened. David dodged Saul's spear, which stuck in the wall. Then David ran out of the house and escaped.

"Guards! Guards!" the king shouted.

The royal guards rushed into the chambers. Saul barked, "Send messengers to watch David's house tonight. If he shows up, they are to report back to me. Then I will have the son of Jesse killed in the morning!"

David fled home, and told his wife what had happened.

Michal said to him, "The house is probably being watched as we speak. If you don't escape tonight, they'll surely kill you tomorrow!"

So Michal helped David escape through a window and climb down to the ground. As David ran off, Michal put a statue in his bed. Then, she put goat hair on its head and dressed it in some of David's clothes.

The next morning, Michal heard a loud knock on the door. When she opened it, Saul's guards said, "We are here to arrest David, by order of King Saul. Where is your husband?"

Michal lied, and said, "David can't come out. He's sick."

The men sent word back to Saul that David was ill. Saul sent the guards back and told them to get David out of his bed. "And bring him to me, so I can have him killed!"

When the guards entered David's house, all they found in his bed was a statue with goat hair on its head.

Saul found out—and was hot! "Why have you tricked me this way?" Saul shouted at his daughter. "You helped my enemy escape!"

Fearing for her life, she lied again. She said, "David said he would kill me if I didn't help him get away!"

Meanwhile, David went to Ramah to see Samuel the prophet, and told him what Saul had done. Then Samuel and David went to Naioth, the village where the prophets lived and trained, and stayed there.

After some told Saul where David was hiding, the king sent a few soldiers to arrest David and bring him back. They went to Ramah and found Samuel in charge of a group of prophets who were all singing. Then the Spirit of God inspired the soldiers to sing with them! Accompanied by music, they all praised and exalted God.

When Saul heard about this, he sent another group of soldiers—but the same thing happened to them. Then Saul sent a third group of soldiers—but the same thing also happened to them. God was keeping Saul's men from harming His servant David.

Finally, Saul said, "I'll go to Ramah myself."

He went as far as the great well at the town of Sechu, not far from Ramah, where he asked the people, "Where are Samuel and David?"

"At Naioth, the Village of the Prophets, in Ramah," they said.

The king continued on his journey. But as he walked along, the Spirit of God took control of him, and he began to sing. By the time he reached Naioth, Saul stripped off his clothes and sang continually in front of Samuel. He dropped to the ground and lay there naked all that day and night. God had inspired Saul to remove his armor and royal garments in order to show that He had rejected him as king.

This amazing miracle began the saying, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (I Samuel 19-9-24).

Some time later, David wrote a psalm, or hymn, about his escape: "Deliver me from my enemies, O God. Defend me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, and save me from bloody men. They lie in wait for my soul—the mighty are gathered against me—but not for my transgression, nor for my sin, O Eternal. They return at evening; they make noise like dogs, and go around the city. Behold, they spew out swords from their lips. But You shall laugh at them, O God; You shall strike them all in derision. Therefore, I wait upon your strength, for God is My defense. I will sing of Your awesome power. Yes, in the morning I will loudly sing of Your abundant mercy, for You have been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble." (See Psalm 59.)

An Oath of Loyalty and Friendship

David escaped from Naioth, and ran to see his friend Jonathan in secret.

"Why is your father out to kill me?" he asked. "How have I sinned against him?"

Jonathan was taken aback. "My father can't be trying to kill you! He never does anything, small or great, without first telling me. Why would he hide this from me? It can't be true, David!"

"Jonathan, I swear it's true! But your father knows you are my best friend. He didn't tell you that he's out to kill me because he doesn't want to break your heart. Truly as God and you live, I'm only one step away from death!"

Then Jonathan said, "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

David said, "Tomorrow is the New Moon, and I'm supposed to eat dinner with your father at the festival. Instead, I'm going to hide in a field until the third day at evening. If Saul wonders where I am, tell

him, ‘David asked me to let him go to Bethlehem, his hometown, so he could take part in a sacrifice his family makes there every year.’ If your father does not get upset, then you’ll know that I’m safe. But if Saul gets angry, you’ll know that he wants to do me harm. Remember, Jonathan, that it was your idea to promise the Eternal that we would always be loyal friends. If I have done anything wrong to deserve death, I would rather you kill me yourself—but don’t hand me over to your father!”

“Don’t worry, my friend,” Jonathan said. “If I discover that my father does want to kill you, I’ll definitely tell you.”

“But how?” David asked.

“Come, let’s go out to the field, and I’ll tell you.”

When they got to the field, Jonathan said, “May the Eternal God of Israel be witness: Two days from now, I will know what my father is planning. Then I will tell you if he’s friendly toward you. But if the king wants to harm you, I promise to tell you and help you escape. And I ask God to punish me severely if I do not keep my word. I pray that the Eternal will bless you, David, just as He used to bless my father. I know that God will someday wipe out all of your enemies. Then, if I’m still alive, please be as kind to me as God has been. But if I am dead, please be kind to my family.”

Jonathan and David made a covenant of friendship that even David’s descendants would have to keep. “If our descendants break our promise,” the prince said, “I pray that the Eternal will take revenge upon them.” David agreed.

Then Jonathan asked David to promise once more that he would be a loyal friend.

After this, Jonathan said, “Tomorrow is the New Moon. People attending the festival will wonder where you are. By the third day, you will be greatly missed. Then go to the place where you hid before and stay beside the stone Ezel, the ‘departure stone.’ I will shoot three arrows at a target off to the side of the rock, and send my servant to find them. You will know if it’s safe to come out by what I tell him. If it is safe, I’ll say, ‘The arrows are on this side of you, boy! Pick them up!’ But if it isn’t safe, I’ll say to the boy, ‘The arrows are farther away!’ This will mean that God has sent you away—and you must go. May we both remember that God will always watch us to make sure we keep our promise to be loyal friends.”

Jonathan departed, while David hid in the field.

During the feast, King Saul sat down to eat by the wall, just as he always did. Jonathan sat across from him, and Abner sat next to him. But Saul noticed that David’s place was empty.

The king did not say anything that day. He thought, “Something must have happened to prevent David from being here. Perhaps he made himself unclean, and thus unfit to attend the festival. Yes, that’s it. Something must have happened.”

The next day, Saul noticed that David’s seat was still empty. Saul asked Jonathan, “Where is that son of Jesse? Why hasn’t he come to eat with us? He wasn’t here yesterday, and he still isn’t here today!”

Jonathan said, “David requested that I let him go home to Bethlehem. He said, ‘My family is offering a sacrifice in the city, and my brother told me I have to be there. Please do me this favor and let me slip away to see my brothers.’”

Saul was furious!

He yelled at Jonathan. “You son of a rebellious woman! You’re no son of mine, you traitor! I know you’ve chosen to be loyal to that son of Jesse. You should be ashamed of yourself! And your own mother should be ashamed that you were ever born. As long as the son of Jesse lives, your future kingdom will be in danger! You’ll never become king! Don’t you understand that? Turn David over to me now! That man must die!”

“Why do you want to kill David?” Jonathan demanded. “What has he ever done to you?”

Suddenly, Saul threw his spear at Jonathan and tried to kill him. At that moment, Jonathan knew his father was truly determined to kill David. Jonathan got up from the table and stormed away, angry that his father had treated David so shamefully.

For the rest of the day, Jonathan refused to eat, as he grieved for his best friend.

In the morning, the prince went out to the field to meet David. He took a servant boy along and told him, “Go run, and find the arrows that I shoot.”

The boy started running. Jonathan shot an arrow so that it went beyond him. When the boy got near the place where the arrow had landed, Jonathan shouted, “Isn’t the arrow on past you?”

Jonathan cried out again, “Hurry! Don’t delay!” The boy picked up the arrows and brought them back to the prince, but he had no idea what was really taking place. Only Jonathan and David knew.

Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and told him, “Good job. Now take these back into town.”

As soon as the boy departed, David got up from his hiding place and bowed low to the ground three times. He was humbly acknowledging that Jonathan was a just prince, true to his word. Then he gave Jonathan a brotherly kiss, and both men cried, for they knew that they might never see each other for the rest of their lives.

Jonathan gives the warning
for David to leave.



Jonathan said, “Take care of yourself, David. And remember, we each have asked God to watch and make sure that we and our descendants keep our promise forever.”

David nodded, and then departed as Jonathan went back to town (I Samuel 20:1-42).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE!

David was now a fugitive on the run, and he wondered what he should do next.

“If I’m going to stay ahead of Saul and his men,” he reasoned, “then I’m going to need food and supplies to keep me alive.”

So he went to see Ahimelech, a priest and great-grandson of Eli, who lived in the town of Nob, which was south of Gibeah. God’s tabernacle had been moved there after Shiloh’s destruction (I Samuel 4:2-3; Jeremiah 7:12).

David thought, “Ahimelech will be able to contact God for me and tell me what to do next.”

When he heard that David had come to visit him, the priest trembled with fear. “Why are you alone?” Ahimelech asked. “Where are your soldiers?”

David lied. He said, “King Saul has sent me on a mission. He ordered me not to tell anyone about it. All I can say is that my men are staying somewhere else.”

David may have lied in order to protect Ahimelech from knowingly aiding a fugitive if Saul ever found out. But all lying, no matter how just the cause may seem, is sin. Lying breaks God’s Law, and leads to tragic results.

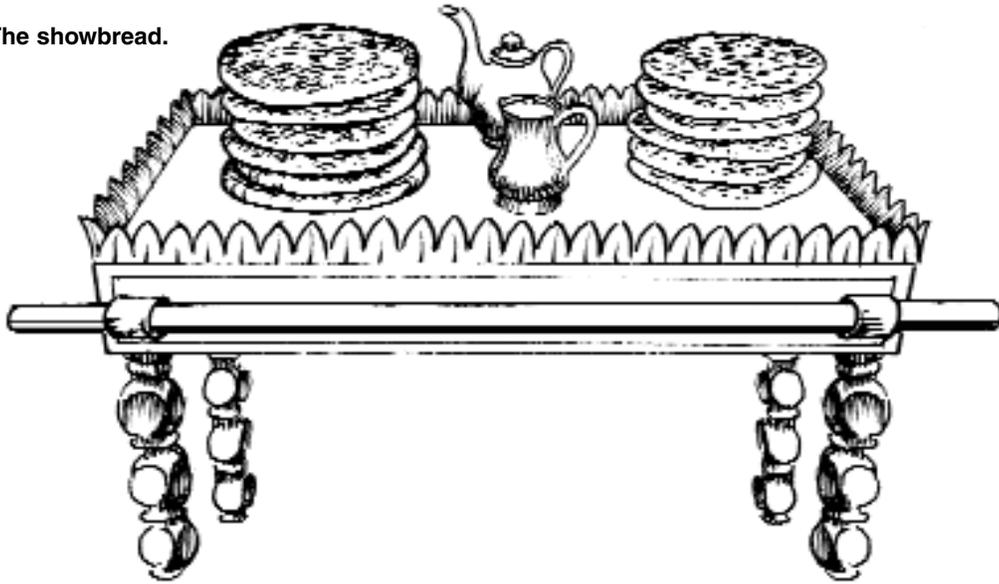
Though David was quite unusual in his wholehearted desire to obey God, he was not perfect. Like all people, he had serious character flaws that he needed to overcome. It was God’s plan to help him do this.

“Now,” David said to Ahimelech, “do you have any food you can give me? Could you spare five loaves of bread?”

“The only bread I have is the showbread,” the priest answered. “You can have it if your soldiers are ceremonially clean and have kept from having intimate relations with women.”

The showbread was set apart for God’s tabernacle. Every week, a fresh batch of 12 loaves of bread, which represented the tribes of Israel, was laid on a table in the holy place. The bread symbolized that Israel was always under the watchful eyes of God. Each Sabbath, the bread was eaten by the priests who were on duty (Exodus 25:30; Leviticus 24:5-9).

The showbread.



“Yes, we are,” David answered. “I never let my men do that when we’re on a mission. They have to be acceptable to worship God, whether we’re on a regular mission or on a special mission, like today.”

Upon asking God for permission to give the old showbread to David, God answered, “Yes,” and Ahimelech gave it to him (I Samuel 22:10).

God knew that, in this particular case, it was far more important to keep David alive than to strictly uphold this regulation. God has the authority to judge such matters (Matthew 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-26). And He had this event recorded in the Bible to teach us that it is always lawful to do good and save someone’s life (Luke 6:9).

Among those who came to worship God, David noticed someone who was familiar to him. Immediately, it dawned on him who the man was: “Doeg the Edomite, the head of Saul’s shepherds! Did he see me? I wonder if he’ll run off and tell Saul where I am?”

David decided to leave Nob.

He asked Ahimelech, “Do you have any weapons, such as a spear or a sword? I had to leave so quickly on this mission for the king that I didn’t have time to bring along my sword or any other weapons.”

The priest said, “The only sword here is the one that belonged to Goliath the Philistine. Since you were the one who killed him in the Valley of Elah, it’s yours to take. The sword is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod.” It had been stored along with the sacred things as a memorial of God’s goodness in delivering Israel.

“It’s the best sword there is. There’s none other like it,” David said. “I’ll take it!”

As soon as he departed, David continued to flee from Saul until he crossed over into Philistine territory and came to Gath, Goliath's hometown, where he met with King Achish. As the Philistines' greatest enemy, it was dangerous for David to go there, especially with Goliath's sword, which everyone knew David used to cut off the giant's head! But David was desperate to escape Saul's manhunt. He may have thought that he could somehow blend in with the Philistines. This was a bold and daring move; neither they nor Saul would expect David to be among them.

Achish's officers and servants said to the king, "Isn't David a ruler back in his own land? And don't the Israelites dance, and sing, 'Saul has killed 1,000 enemies. And David has killed 10,000 enemies'? So why is this Hebrew here among us?"

David considered what they were saying, and it made him afraid of Achish. "What have I gotten myself into?" he thought.

He began to lose faith that God would deliver him, so he took matters into his own hands. Before everyone, David pretended to be insane. He acted confused and scratched up the doors of the town gate, while drooling in his beard.

Achish said to his officers, "Look at this madman! He's crazy! Why did you bring him to me? I have enough crazy people without you bringing another one here. Keep him away from my palace!" (David later recorded this event in Psalms 34 and 56.)

David escaped from Gath and traveled about ten miles, hiding out in the Cave of Adullam, in the western foothills of Judah.

Meanwhile, back in Bethlehem, David's brothers and the rest of his family were being harassed by Saul and his men. When David's family found out where he was hiding, they secretly left town, and met up with him after traveling about 12 miles.

A lot of other people joined David as well, united by desperate circumstances—those who were in distress, discontent from being under Saul's rule, or drowning in debt. Soon, David was the leader of 400 men.

David left Adullam Cave and led his men and their families to the stronghold of Mizpeh in Moab. There, he talked with the king of Moab, who was no friend of Saul. Since David was part Moabite (through his great-grandmother Ruth), he thought his distant kinsmen would offer him protection.

"My lord, please let my father and mother stay with you," David said, "until I find out what God wants to do with me."

The king agreed, and David brought his parents to Moab, where they stayed in safety while David continued to hide. Like a good son,

he did not want his parents to go through the constant stress and trouble of being on the run (I Samuel 21:1-15; 22:1-4).

Saul Orders Execution of Priests

One day, a prophet named Gad told David, “You must leave here and go back to Judah. That is God’s will.” Without hesitation, David departed and went to the Forest of Hereth.

Meanwhile, Saul was holding court under a tamarisk tree at Gibeah when he heard that David and his men had been spotted.

Holding his spear tightly, Saul said to his officers, “Listen to me! None of you are from Judah, David’s tribe. You belong to the tribe of Benjamin. If that son of Jesse ever becomes king, will he give you fields or vineyards? Will he make you officers in charge of hundreds or thousands, as I have done?”

The men slowly shook their heads.

“Then why are you all plotting against me!” Saul screamed. “Not one of you told me that my own son Jonathan had made a covenant of friendship with David. And not one of you cared enough to tell me that Jonathan had helped one of my officers to rebel against me. Now, thanks to you, that son of Jesse is trying to ambush me!”

Doeg the Edomite was standing with the other officers. He stepped forward and said, “My lord, when I was recently in Nob worshipping God at the tabernacle, I saw that son of Jesse. He was visiting Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech spoke to the Eternal for him, and then gave David food and supplies. He even allowed David to take Goliath’s sword.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

Doeg stammered as he tried to think of an excuse.

“Oh, never mind!” Saul said.

The king rushed a message to Ahimelech and his whole family of priests at Nob, ordering them to come to him. Though puzzled by Saul’s request, they dutifully obeyed.

When they arrived, Saul said, “Listen to me, son of Ahitub.”

“Certainly, my lord,” the priest said.

Saul demanded, “Why did you plot against me with that son of Jesse? Don’t pretend you have no idea of what I’m talking about. You helped David rebel against me by giving him food and a sword. You even spoke to God for him. And now David is out to ambush me this very day!”

“My lord, what are you saying? None of your officers and servants is more loyal than David! Is he not your son-in-law and the captain of your guard? Everyone in your family respects him.

Besides, this is not the first time I have talked with God for David, and it's never made you angry before! So please don't accuse me or my family of wrongdoing. I have no idea what's going on."

The king gripped his spear even tighter, and said, "Ahimelech, you and all your family are going to die!"

Saul shouted to his bodyguards, "These so-called priests of God helped David! They knew he was running away from me, but they didn't bother to tell me. Kill them!"

The guards looked at each other, and then looked down to the ground. They would not attack God's priests. They respected their offices and feared God's wrath.

"Well," Saul said, "what are you waiting for?"

The guards did not move.

So the king turned to Doeg the Edomite, and said, "Kill these priests!"

It never dawned on Saul that what he wanted done to Ahimelech and his family—who were innocent—should have been done to all of the wicked Amalekites.

Doeg did not hesitate to act, and, before the day had ended, the Edomite killed 85 priests. He then attacked the town of Nob, where the priests had lived, and he slew everyone there—men, women, children, and even babies. He also killed their cattle, donkeys, and sheep. This fulfilled God's judgment against Eli and his house. Remember that Eli failed to remove his wicked sons from the priesthood.

There was one survivor of this calamity: Abiathar, Ahimelech's son. In his escape, he ran to join up with David, telling him the horrible news.

David said, "That day when I saw Doeg—I knew he would tell Saul! Your family died because of me. Stay here. Don't worry! You'll be safe here with me."

Then David recalled the lie he had told to Abiathar's father. "I should have told Ahimelech the truth," he thought, "and allowed him the choice of helping me or turning me away." David sadly realized that his lie, though seemingly minor, could have contributed to this tragedy (I Samuel 22:5-23).

An Ungrateful City

One day, as David and his men were discussing plans at their hide-out in Adullam, some visitors came asking for help. "The Philistines keep attacking Keilah and stealing our grain from the threshing place! Please help us!"

Through Abiathar the priest, David asked God if he should attack the Philistines.

God said, “Yes. Attack them and rescue Keilah. I will give you the victory.”

But David’s men, who had grown to 600 warriors, were worried. David had the faith to attack the enemy, but his men didn’t.

They said, “Look, David, even here in Judah, we’re afraid of the Philistines. How much more will we be terrified of them if we try to take them on at Keilah?”

To satisfy and encourage his men, David asked God for permission once more. Again, God gave His blessing, telling David, “Leave right now! Do not delay! Tell your men that I will deliver the Philistines into your hand.”

Hearing this, David and his warriors dashed along the three-mile trip to Keilah and launched a lightning attack against the Philistines, slaying many of them. Then David led away their cattle, and rescued the people of Keilah.

Meanwhile, King Saul, upon learning that David was in Keilah, said, “At last, God has let me catch that son of Jesse!” Somehow, Saul was still deceiving himself into believing that he was God’s servant and therefore had a right to sit on the throne.

He snapped out orders to his officers. “Gather the troops! David is trapped inside the walls of Keilah.”

The town was completely surrounded by thick walls, with only one entrance, made up of wooden gates secured by a heavy metal bar. Saul knew that there was only one way in and out of Keilah. So Saul raced to get there in order to surround the town, and trap David and his men.

The king sent messengers to nearby towns and villages, to gather more troops.

As this took place, Abiathar the priest joined David at Keilah, bringing along the ephod and everything he needed to receive answers from God.

David soon learned about Saul’s sudden plan to capture him there. Instead of relying on his own human reasoning, David turned to God.

He prayed, “Eternal God of Israel, I have been told that Saul and his troops are on their way here to kill me. What should I do? Suppose the king threatens to destroy this town because of me—would the elders of Keilah turn me over to him? Is Saul really coming after me? Please tell me, God. I am Your servant.”

“Yes, Saul will come,” the Eternal answered.

David began to worry, so he inquired of God about the elders of

Keilah. “Will they hand me and my soldiers over to Saul?” he asked.

God answered, “Yes, they will.” The Eternal sees and knows all. He understood that, despite having been saved from the Philistines, the townspeople of Keilah were willing to betray David and give him up to Saul. They were not willing to risk their lives to save the man who risked his life to save them. What ingratitude!

David and his 600 mighty men rushed out from there and moved from place to place. They did everything they could to stay ahead of Saul’s manhunt.

When Saul heard that David was no longer in Keilah, he decided to turn back (I Samuel 23:1-13).

Jonathan Encourages David

David hid safely in hideouts among the many ravines and caves of Judah’s wilderness, a barren desert positioned between hill country and the Dead Sea. Saul continued to hunt for David like a bloodhound, but God never allowed him to catch David.

Jonathan worried for his friend, and wanted so much to help him. But the prince was under the constant watchful eyes of Saul and his men. With God’s help, Jonathan managed to slip away and visit David at Horesh, in the Wilderness of Ziph.

Though David’s men probably spied Jonathan with great suspicion, David embraced his friend.

“What are you doing here? How did you find out where I was hiding?”

“Can anything escape God’s eyes?” Jonathan said.

While the rest of the men went about their business, the two companions sat down to talk.

“David, I know that you’re afraid that Saul is in the area looking for you,” Jonathan said. “But don’t be. My father will never get his hands on you. There’s no doubt in my mind that you are going to be the next king of Israel. And I will lead under you. Even my father knows that this is true.”

Jonathan risked his life to encourage and support his friend, and to show loyalty to him. Never did the prince treat David as a threat or rival. Jonathan’s love and respect for his friend helped the prince to accept a lesser role in God’s overall plan. This is why Jonathan never allowed himself to be resentful or jealous of Israel’s next king.

At the end of the visit, the two men promised God that they would always be loyal to each other. Then Jonathan went home, while David remained in hiding (I Samuel 23:14-18).

Closing in for the Kill!

A group of loyalists from Ziph went to Gibeah and told the king that David was hiding out near their town.

“Your majesty,” they said to Saul, after bowing before him, “David has a hideout not far from us! It is near Horesh, somewhere on Mount Hachilah, south of Jeshimon. If you decide to come, we will help you catch him.”

Saul was pleased. He said, “May the Eternal bless you for showing me such favor. Now I ask you to do one more favor for me: Find out exactly where David’s hideout is, where he goes, and who has seen him there. David is very crafty, so I need you to find out where all his hiding places are. Come back as soon as you are sure. Then I will come down with you. If David is still in the area, I’ll find him—even if I have to search among all the clans of Judah.”

The people agreed, and then went back to Ziph. They soon learned that David and his men were still hiding south of Jeshimon in the barren Wilderness of Maon. The townspeople reported this to Saul, who gathered his army in pursuit of David.

But David heard that the king and his soldiers were coming. So he went to one of his hideouts in Maon. Saul discovered where David was and started closing in on him.

Saul led his men around one side of a rocky hill in hot pursuit of David and his men, who were on the other side racing to get away. The king and his troops encircled the hill, and were only moments away from capturing David! If God did not soon intervene, David would be in Saul’s hands.

Just then, a messenger came, saying, “King Saul! King Saul! Come quickly! The Philistines are attacking Israel. They’re taking everything!”

For a moment, Saul was torn. David was just within his grasp. “But if I don’t deal with these Philistine raiders right away,” Saul thought, “they could destroy my kingdom.”

Reluctantly, the king ordered his troops to turn away from chasing David, and they raced back to fight the Philistines.

God had intervened again. And this is why the rocky hill where David was almost caught came to be called in Hebrew, “Sela Hammahlekoth,” which means “The Rock of Escape.”

A very grateful David departed from there and went to live in the cavernous stronghold of En Gedi, an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea, about 14 miles east of Ziph (I Samuel 23:19-29).

Sparing Saul's Life

After Saul had successfully driven back the Philistines, he learned of David's whereabouts. So the king led his elite fighting force of 3,000 warriors and hunted for David and his men near the Rocks of the Wild Goat at En Gedi.

The manhunt brought the soldiers to some sheep pens alongside a road near the entrance of a cave. Needing to relieve himself, Saul went inside. Little did Saul know that David and his men were hiding at the back of the cave!

David's men whispered into his ear, "Look! God told you that He would deliver your enemies into your hand, so that you can do whatever you want with them. This must be the day the Eternal was talking about."

"Yes," urged others. "Now is the time, David, while the king is without his bodyguards."

David nodded, and then sneaked over and cut off a small piece of Saul's robe. Saul did not notice a thing.

As David sneaked back to his men, his conscience began to bother him and his heart filled with guilt. He felt sorry for what he had just done. David knew that, in God's eyes, deliberately damaging Saul's royal clothing was the same as attacking Saul himself. It was an act of rebellion and disrespect, and David was ashamed of himself.

"That's it?" David's men said to him. "This is all you're going to do to Saul? This man wants to take your life. God delivers him to you, and this is what you do?"

"Saul is still my king. I will never lay a hand against the Eternal's anointed—and neither shall any of you!"

Even though Saul was evil, David still respected the office and authority of the man who wanted him dead. He was determined to be loyal to God's government, regardless of the current leader's sins and shortcomings. David decided to wait on God to fulfill His promise *His* way, according to *His* plan and timing.

Saul left the cave, joined his troops and started down the road, unaware that David could have easily taken his life.

David also got up and left the cave and, from a distance, shouted, "My lord the king!"

Saul turned and spotted David, who was bowed down very low.

"My lord, why do you listen to men who accuse me of trying to harm you?" David said. "Look! You can see for yourself that the Eternal gave me the chance to kill you in the cave today. Some of my

men wanted to kill you, but I wouldn't let them. I told them, 'I will never lay a hand against the Eternal's anointed!'"

Then David held up the piece of fabric he had cut from Saul's robe. "My lord," he said, "look at what I'm holding. It's a piece of your robe."

The king looked down at his robe and saw that a small piece had been cut off. Then he looked at his officers and bodyguards, who were just as startled as he was.

David said, "This is proof that I could have killed you if I wanted to—but I spared your life! This should prove to you that I'm no rebel out to do you harm. My lord, I have done nothing to cause you to keep trying to ambush and kill me.

"May the Eternal judge between you and me, and may He avenge me of you for what you are doing to me. But I will not lay a hand against you. An old proverb says, 'Wickedness comes from the wicked,' and so I will not harm you.

"Who am I that the king of Israel should chase after me? I'm as worthless as a dead dog or a flea. I pray that God will help me escape and plead my case for me."

For a moment, Saul did not know what to say. All the anger and bitterness he had toward David was gone. Instead, he felt foolish and ashamed.

Finally, Saul said, "David, my son—is that you?" Then he began to cry.

The king said, "David, you are more righteous than I am. You treated me with kindness, even though I've been nothing but cruel to you. God gave you the chance to kill me and take my throne, but you spared me. If you really were my enemy, I would not be standing here alive. I pray that the Eternal will reward you greatly for the kindness you have shown me. I realize now that you will be Israel's next king—and a powerful king at that! With God as your witness, promise me that you will not destroy my descendants."

David promised. Then Saul departed in peace. (In Psalms 57 and 142, David wrote about this amazing event.)

Despite his words of sorrow and regret, Saul was not willing to step aside yet. His remorse was only temporary. It was not a deep, heartfelt willingness to change his mind and life.

David did not doubt this, which is why he and his men returned to their hideout (I Samuel 24:1-22).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

RESPECTING AUTHORITY

After a long, full and abundant life, Samuel, the last of the judges of Israel, died. People from all over the land gathered to mourn for this great prophet, for his death marked the end of an era. Samuel was buried at his home in Ramah. (Like Noah, Moses, and all of God's faithful servants, Samuel will come back to life at the Return of Jesus Christ. Only this time, Samuel will be a spirit being and will live forever.)

Still on the run, David moved his camp back to the Wilderness of Maon. There, he learned that the servants of a certain rich man were in Carmel, shearing wool from their master's sheep. Being a shepherd, David knew that once this hard work was finished, there would be a special day of celebration to rejoice the abundance of sheared wool.

David and his men could have easily taken whatever food and supplies that they wanted from these servants by force—but that is not the way of God.

Instead, they protected the rich man's servants from raiders and bandits who routinely preyed upon the weak and defenseless. David watched over them day and night, making the laborers feel as safe as they would have been inside a walled city.

Now, the servants' master was Nabal. Not only was he the proud owner of 3,000 sheep, but he also possessed 1,000 goats. Nabal was a descendant of Caleb, a wise and faithful servant of God who lived during Moses' and Joshua's time. Sadly, Nabal was not like Caleb, for he lived up to his own name, which means "fool." Nabal was a rough and mean person who foolishly acted before thinking. However, he was married to a sensible and beautiful woman named Abigail.

As Nabal thought about his wealth, he received a surprise visit: Ten men rode in on horses, delivering a message from David.

The message went: "May peace be with you, your family and all that you possess. I heard that you were shearing the wool from your many sheep. When your shepherds were with us in Carmel, we did not harm them nor did we steal anything from them. Ask your shepherds, and they will tell you the same thing. Please let my servants find favor in your eyes. We would like to join your celebrations, so please be kind and share some of your food with us."

Nabal knew that David's protection had been valuable, but he did not appreciate it. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with David!

So Nabal turned to the ten messengers, and said, "Who is David, the son of Jesse? There are many slaves on the run from their master, and there are too many of them these days. Why should I take my bread, my water, and the meat that I've had cooked for my own servants and give it to someone that I don't even know? Besides, I'm not sure that David sent you!"

Nabal was so selfish that he did not want to share any of the blessings of his wealth. So he pretended that he never heard of David—despite the fact that David's reputation was known far and wide throughout the land.

When the messengers returned to their camp and repeated everything Nabal had said, David became steaming mad!

He barked, "Get your swords! We'll deal with this Nabal!"

Four hundred men strapped on their swords and followed David, while the other 200 men stayed behind to guard the camp.

As they rode out on their horses, David said to his closest lieutenants, "I wasted my time protecting Nabal's possessions in the wilderness and keeping them from being stolen by bandits! And how does he repay me? With evil for good! By morning, there won't be a man or boy left from Nabal's family or even his servants' families. May God punish me if I don't slay them all!" (I Samuel 25:1-13, 21, 22).

Abigail Intervenes

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants told Abigail about the nasty message Nabal had sent. The servant explained that David's men had been good to the workers who were taking care of the sheep in the fields.

"They never hurt us, and never stole anything from us, even though they have the manpower to do so," the servant said. "They even protected us day and night from marauders. And now, after David sent some messengers to wish our master well, Nabal shouted insults at them! Your husband is so stubborn, he won't listen to anyone. Isn't there something you can do? Please think of something quick, or else our master and his family and his servants are all doomed!"

Abigail did not hesitate. She quickly got together 200 loaves of bread, two large skins of wine, the meat from five sheep, a large sack of roasted grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 cakes of dried figs.

She loaded all the food on donkeys and told her servants, "Take this on ahead. I will catch up with you."



She did not tell her husband what she was doing, because she knew that Nabal would not see the wisdom of helping—not angering—Israel’s future king. Also, Abigail chose to do the right thing, obeying God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Suddenly, Abigail met David as he and his men headed straight at her. She quickly got off her donkey and humbly bowed down in front of David.

“Let this sin be upon me, my lord, your maidservant. Please let me explain. Please do not pay any attention to Nabal. Even his name fits him, for it means ‘fool.’ I did not know that your men had visited us, but please take this gift of food that I’ve brought for you and your followers. The Eternal has kept you from taking revenge and from killing innocent people. But I hope that your enemies and anyone else who wants to harm you will end up like Nabal.

“The Eternal will always protect you and your family, because, unlike King Saul, you fight for Him. I pray that you will never do anything evil as long as you live. The Eternal your God will keep you safe when your enemies try to kill you. But He will snatch away their lives quicker than you can throw a rock from a slingshot. God has promised

to do many good things for you—even make you king of Israel. God will keep His promises to you, and now your conscience will be clear, because you won't be guilty of taking revenge and killing innocent people. When God does all those good things for you, please remember me.”

Abigail did not want David to jeopardize his future by giving way to personal revenge in anger, thus violating God's will.

David was impressed by this woman's meek attitude. He said to her, “May the Eternal God of Israel be blessed! It is clear that He must have sent you to meet me. And you should also be praised. Your good sense kept me from taking revenge and taking the lives of innocent people. If you hadn't come to meet me as quickly as you have, every male member in Nabal's family and in his servants' families would have been killed by morning.”

David then accepted the food Abigail had brought.

“Do not worry,” he said. “You can go home in peace. I will do what you asked.”

Abigail returned home and found Nabal throwing a party fit for a king. He was very drunk and feeling pleased with himself, so she did not tell him how they had narrowly escaped death. But when he sobered up the next morning, Abigail told him everything that had happened.

When Nabal heard how close he had come to losing his life, he was struck with fear. He lay in bed, paralyzed from a stroke. He was as still as a stone. Ten days later, God took his life.

David heard that Nabal had died. He praised God for judging between him and Nabal. David was grateful that God had kept him from sinning out of anger. He said, “God has returned Nabal's wickedness upon his own head.”

David was not celebrating Nabal's death. It is wrong to celebrate or be happy over the downfall of an enemy. David was simply thanking God for His intervention in the matter.

Now that Abigail was a widow, David sent messengers to ask her if she would marry him. She bowed down and said, “I would willingly be David's maidservant and wash his servants' feet.” In saying this, she was showing a humble attitude.

Abigail quickly got ready and went back with David's messengers. She rode on her donkey, while five of her servant women walked alongside. She and David were married as soon as she arrived.

David had earlier married Ahinoam from the town of Jezreel, so both she and Abigail were now David's wives.

Though he was wholeheartedly faithful, loyal and obedient to God, David, like all people, had some serious character flaws. One of his biggest flaws was his weakness for women. God intended marriage to be between *one* husband and *one* wife. But David wanted to be married to several wives. God would have to teach him that, like leaven, David's sin would spread to more sins in his life. And the results would be disastrous!

Meanwhile, King Saul ordered David's wife Michal to marry Palti, the son of Laish, who came from the town of Gallim. But God did not give Saul the authority to dissolve another man's marriage (I Samuel 25:14-44).

David Spares Saul—Again!

Once again, some people from Ziph went to Gibeah to talk with Saul. "David has a hideout on Mount Hachilah, across from Jeshimon," they told him.

Saul took his 3,000-man army of professional warriors and went to look for David there in the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul set up camp on Mount Hachilah, which is across the road from Jeshimon.

But David was hiding out in the desert. When David heard that Saul was following him, he sent spies to find out if it was true. Then he sneaked up to Saul's camp. He noticed that Saul and his army commander, Abner, were sleeping in the middle of the camp, with soldiers sleeping all around them, protecting the king as he slept.

David asked Ahimelech the Hittite and Abishai, one of David's nephews (I Chronicles 2:13-17), "I plan on sneaking into Saul's camp tonight. Who will go with me?"

Abishai said, "I will!"

That night, the two men crept into the camp, as Saul, Abner and the soldiers slept soundly. Near the king's head was a water jar and his spear, which was stuck in the ground.

Abishai whispered, "This time, God has delivered your enemy into your hands! Let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of his own spear."

But David said, "Don't kill him! What man can do harm to God's anointed and not be found guilty? As surely as the Eternal lives, God will kill Saul, or Saul will die a natural death or be killed in battle—but as for me, I will not harm God's anointed. If you want to do something, grab the king's spear and his water jar. Then let's leave."

Refusing to follow his own will, David was putting his future (and Saul's) entirely in God's hands. And even though the king was bent

on doing him evil, David still respected Saul's office and authority.

Taking the water jar and the spear, the two men left the camp. None of Saul's soldiers knew what had happened or even woke up—the Eternal had made all of them fall into a deep sleep.

David and Abishai crossed the valley and went to the top of the next hill, where they were at a safe distance.

“Abner!” David called. “Can you hear me?”

Abner shouted back, “Who dares to disturb the king?”

“Abner, are you not a valiant man?” David replied. “Who in all Israel is like you? Why, then, did you fail to protect your king? Anyone who went into your camp could have killed Saul tonight. What you have done is not good! As surely as God lives, Abner, you and your men deserve to die for not protecting the Eternal's anointed. Look about you. See if you can find the king's spear and the water jar that were lying near his head.”

Abner and the king's bodyguards looked and saw that the water jug and spear were missing. Then Abner turned to the king, whose face showed a mixture of anger, shock and fear.

Saul called out, “David, my son! Is that you?”

“Yes it is, my lord. Why are you after me, your servant? What have I done? What evil or crime have I committed? Please listen to what your servant has to say: If God has stirred you up against me, may He accept a sacrifice to change His mind. But if people have turned you against me, may the Eternal punish them! They have forced me to leave the Promised Land and have told me to serve foreign gods. Don't let me die in a land far away from the face of God. I'm no more important than a flea! Why should the king of Israel waste his time hunting me down as if I were a partridge in the mountains, which is nearly impossible to catch? I'm worthless!”

“David, you passed up an opportunity to kill me. I was very wrong about you. I should have never tried to kill you. I've acted like a fool. But from now on, I will never try to harm you. You're like a son to me; please return home.”

David picked up Saul's spear and held it high over his head.

“My lord, here is your spear! Send one of your soldiers to come and get it. God put your life in my hands today, but you are His anointed. I will not harm you. The Eternal rewards people who are faithful and righteous. I saved your life today, and I pray that God will protect me and keep me safe.”

Saul said, “David, may God bless you and give you success!” Then the king and his 3,000 troops departed for home (I Samuel 26:1-25).

Hiding Among the Philistines

Consumed with fear and worry, David thought, “One of these days, Saul is going to catch me and slay me. The only way to escape from his grasp is to go to Philistia. Then I’ll be outside of Israel, and Saul will give up trying to catch me.” Despite what God had told him (I Samuel 22:5), David decided to leave Judah.

David and his 600 men, along with their wives and children, went across the border to stay in Gath with King Achish.

Because David had become a well-known adversary to Saul, this Philistine ruler was glad to welcome him.

When some of Achish’s generals complained that David was living among them, the king simply said, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Since Saul is my enemy, that makes David my friend. Therefore, I will give the son of Jesse safe haven among us. And, sooner or later, I will get David to fight with us against Israel.”

The Philistine ruler also reasoned that if David ever became king, Achish would use David like a puppet, and wield much power and influence in Israel.

Saul soon found out that David had run off to Gath. Since the king did not have the military resources to invade Philistine territory and hunt for David, Saul stopped trying to catch him.

“Besides,” he said to one of his generals, “David can’t seize my throne from me as long as he stays exiled in Philistia.”

One day, David was talking with Achish and said, “If you are happy with me, then let me live in one of the towns in the countryside. I’m not important enough to live here with you in the royal city.”

David wanted to get away from the king’s constant watch. He also wanted to keep his men and their families away from the Philistines’ pagan influences.

That same day, Achish gave David the town of Ziklag, which was about 13 miles away from Beersheba, and Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah ever since.

The Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites lived in southern Canaan and the northern region of the Sinai Peninsula, in the area from Telam to Shur and as far as Egypt, and David often attacked their towns. Whenever David and his men attacked a town, they took the sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and the clothing, and killed everyone who lived there. He left no survivors, so that King Achish would not know about David’s secret raids, which he led for the 16 months he lived in Philistia.

After he returned from a raid, David always went to see Achish, who would ask, “Where did you attack today?”

David would answer, “Oh, we attacked some town in the wilderness that belonged to Judah.” Sometimes, David would say, “Oh, we attacked a town where the clan of Jerahmeel lives” or “We attacked a town in the desert where the Kenites live.”

These were far enough away that Achish would not know David’s exact movements.

David gave the impression that Judah was becoming increasingly hostile to him. But in reality, Judah appreciated David more and more for attacking their neighboring enemies.

King Achish trusted David and thought, “David’s people must be furious with him. He can never go home again. From now on, the son of Jesse will be taking orders from me” (I Samuel 27:1-12).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

A TRAGIC END

One day, King Achish of Gath had David appear before his throne, and said, “David, I have freely given you safe haven from the hand of your enemy, King Saul. This said, our Philistine army is assembling right as I speak. We plan to attack Saul and his troops. Of course, in exchange for the favor and protection I have given you, I expect you and your men to fight alongside us.”

David replied, “Surely you know what your servant can do. I will not fail to help those who have shown me kindness.”

“Very well,” Achish said. “From this moment, you and your men will always be my chief guardians and bodyguards.” This was a very high honor.

The army of the Philistines encamped at Shunem, southwest of the hill of Moreh and 16 miles away from the Dead Sea. Meanwhile, Saul called the soldiers of Israel to gather arms and set up camp in Gilboa.

Without the Holy Spirit guiding him, Saul lacked the boldness and courage he needed to face his enemies. Saul took one look at the Philistine army and started quivering with fear. So he asked God what he should do. But the Eternal would not answer, either in a dream or by a priest or a prophet. God does not help those who deliberately rebel against Him.

“If only Samuel the prophet were alive,” the king thought. “He could speak to God for me.”

Just then a wicked thought popped into Saul’s mind: “Samuel may be dead, but what if I found a witch or someone else who talks to the dead? If I could find such a woman, she could contact Samuel for me, and then Samuel could talk to God and tell me what’s going to happen to my kingdom.”

As king, Saul had spent most of his reign removing witches, wizards, sorcerers and other such demon-influenced people from Israel. He knew that before the Israelites ever set foot in the Promised Land, God declared that all witches, wizards, sorcerers, spiritists, charmers—and anyone else who cast spells or contacted the demonic world—were forbidden and should be put to death (Leviticus 19:31; 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:11). God knew that such evil people would turn His

people away from Him to worship demons. This would cut Israel off from God and His blessings—which is exactly what Satan wanted. This is why the devil constantly looked for ways to bring pagan customs, traditions and rituals among God’s people.

But Saul had now grown so desperate, he was willing to seek the aid of witches and other servants of Satan!

The king told his officers, “Find me a witch or medium who can speak to the dead for me.”

They soon told him about a witch who lived in En Dor, which was only about three and a half miles away from Shunem.

That night, Saul disguised himself, and risked his life venturing through Philistine-held territory in order to talk with this witch.

When he and two of his men went to the witch, Saul, still in his disguise, asked her to bring up the spirit of someone for him.

The woman said, “You know that King Saul has removed mediums and spiritists from Israel! Why are you trying to trick me and get me executed?”

Saul replied, “I swear by the living God that you will not be punished.”

Saul knew that this witch should have been killed right on the spot. Yet his mind had become so rebellious and twisted that he rejected God’s will and deceived himself into believing that he was not “really” sinning. And, by attaching God’s name to a vow that should have never been uttered, Saul broke the Third Commandment—he took God’s name in vain (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11).

Assured by Saul’s foolish vow, the witch said, “Alright, then. Who do you want me to bring up?”

“The spirit of Samuel,” Saul answered.

As she had done many times in the past, the witch relied on evil spells to call upon the demon world. Then something strange flashed before her eyes: An eerie image of an old man floated just before her! The witch screamed, assuming that it was Samuel.

But it was not really Samuel; it was only a demon masquerading as the dead prophet. Satan and his demons want people to believe that the dead are alive in some kind of “spirit world”—but the truth is, the dead are in their graves waiting to be resurrected back to life (I Corinthians 15). The devil has been lying about this ever since Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-3).

The witch knew that she did not have the power to bring the dead back to life—only God does. However, since Saul was determined to speak to the dead, God decided to use the king’s wicked plan against him.

Assuming that the “spirit of Samuel” was floating before her, the evil witch turned to Saul and said, “You’ve tricked me! You must be the King Saul!”

Saul tried to calm her down, saying, “Don’t be afraid. Just tell me what you see.” He and his men could not see the evil spirit, but the witch could.

She answered, “I see something like a spirit rising up out of the earth.”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like an old man covered with a mantle.”

Hearing this, Saul also assumed she was seeing Samuel, so he bowed down low.

Still posing as the dead prophet, the lying spirit asked, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up like this?”



“Samuel, I’m deeply troubled,” Saul answered. “The Philistines are poised to attack me. God has turned His back on me and won’t answer me anymore, either by prophets or by dreams. What should I do?”

The evil spirit said, “If the Eternal has turned away from you and is now your enemy, why do you ask me? I’ve already told you: God has torn your kingdom out of your hand and given it to David! When the Eternal was angry with the Amalekites, He ordered you to destroy them—but you refused to listen. That’s why God is doing this to you. Tomorrow, God will deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines. Then, you and your sons will join me in death.”

At once, Saul collapsed to the ground, terrified at what the evil spirit had said. (Saul was also weak from having not eaten anything since the day before.)

The witch came over to him, saw that the king was frightened out of his mind, and said, “My lord, I listened to you and risked my life to do what you asked. Now please listen to me. Let me get you a little something to eat. It will give you strength for your walk back to camp.”

“No,” Saul said. “I won’t eat!”

The king could have used this as an opportunity to humble himself and fast—deny himself food and drink for a time and replace his pride with humility and meekness. Saul could have drawn close to God by surrendering to Him through prayer and fasting.

Yet, Satan continued to work against the king. He used the witch and Saul’s officers, who kept on urging Saul to eat, until he finally agreed.

The woman rushed to kill a calf that she had been fattening up. She cooked part of the meat and baked some unleavened bread. Then she served the food to Saul and his officers, who ate, and then left before daylight (I Samuel 28:1-7).

David Is Sent Away

The army of Israel camped near the Spring of Jezreel, only a few miles south of Shunem. Meanwhile, the Philistines moved their massive army to Aphek, about 24 miles north of Gath.

In a mighty show of force and military precision, the lords of the Philistines had their troops march in groups of 100 and 1,000.

Yet when David and his men marched at the end of the procession with King Achish, the Philistine princes and commanders were shocked. “What are these Hebrews doing here?” they complained. “They have no part in our invasion.”

Achish tried to assure them. “These are David’s men,” he explained. “David used to be one of King Saul’s most valuable officers. But he has since left Saul and joined my army a long time ago. I’ve never had even one complaint about him since he defected to me.” Achish still did not know about David’s raiding parties against the neighboring enemies of the tribe of Judah.

The army commanders were angry. They suspected that David might be pretending to be loyal in order to gain their trust.

They shouted, “Send David back to the town you gave him. We won’t have him going into battle with us. Don’t you know that this Hebrew could turn against us and attack us from the rear? Saul would gladly take David back as an officer if he brought him the heads of our soldiers. This is the same David that the Israelites dance and sing about, saying, ‘Saul has killed a thousand enemies; David has killed ten thousand enemies!’ Send him away!”

Achish did not want to, but he gave in to their demands. He called David over and said, “As surely as God lives, you’ve been upright with me, and I’m pleased by the fact that you did not hesitate to assemble with my troops. I don’t believe you have done anything wrong, from the day you joined me until this very moment. However, the other rulers won’t let you join them in battle.”

“But what have I done?” David asked. “Do you know of anything I’ve ever done that would keep me from fighting the enemies of my lord and king?”

Perhaps to flatter David, Achish said, “I believe that you’re as good as an angel of God, but our army commanders have decided that you can’t fight in this battle. You and your troops will have to go back to Ziklag. Leave tomorrow morning as soon as it’s light. I am pleased with you, so don’t let any of this bother you. And try not to upset the other rulers.”

So David did as the king requested. Early the next morning, he and his men headed back toward Philistia, while the Philistines left for Jezreel (I Samuel 29:1-11).

Sneak Attack!

During the three-day journey to Ziklag, David and his men looked forward to seeing their families again.

But, as soon as they came within sight of the town, they knew something was wrong. Ziklag was now a burned-out heap of ruins. The men soon learned that, while they had been away, the Amalekites had attacked Ziklag and burned it to the ground—they even took away the women and children as spoils of war!

Had Saul obeyed God and completely destroyed the Amalekites when he had the chance, this would not have happened.

David and his men wept over the loss of their families until they were too weak to cry anymore. And as David mourned for his two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail, his soldiers said, “This is all your fault, David. We wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for you!”

They were so upset, they even thought about stoning David to death!

David was desperate. He turned to the Eternal for strength, and said to Abiathar the priest, “Let’s ask God what to do.”

Through Abiathar, David asked God, “Should I go after the people who raided our town? Can I overtake them?”

“Pursue them,” God answered. “You will overtake them, and you will rescue your families.”

Encouraged, David boldly barked out orders and led his 600 men to the Besor Brook, seasonal rivers that emptied into the Mediterranean Sea. But 200 of his troops were too weary to cross it, so they stayed behind. David and the other 400 soldiers crossed the river and continued their pursuit.

Some of David’s scouts found a young man who was lying out in a field, weak and exhausted, for he had not had food or water for three days. Bringing the man to David, they gave the Egyptian some bread, a drink of water, some dried figs, and two handfuls of raisins. Refreshed, the Egyptian felt much better.

“Who do you serve?” David asked. “And where do you come from?”

“I’m from Egypt,” the young man answered. “My master is an Amalekite, but when I fell sick, he abandoned me out here in the wilderness. That was three days ago. We had attacked some towns in the southern area of the Cherethites, in the territory that belongs to Judah, and in the southern area where the clan of Caleb lives. We also burned down the town of Ziklag.”

Some of David’s men wanted to kill the Egyptian right then and there. But David gave them a silent but stern look. They knew he wanted them to back off. So they did.

David turned back to the young man, and said, “Will you take me to those Amalekites?”

The Egyptian thought, “My master left me out here to die. Were it not for these men, I surely would have starved to death.”

“Yes,” he said to David, “I will. But you must promise—with God as a witness—that you won’t kill me or hand me over to my master.”

David agreed, and then the Egyptian led them to the Amalekites.

David sent scouts to secretly spy on the raiders’ camp. They reported that the Amalekites were eating and drinking, dancing and singing

over the great bounty they had taken from Philistia and Judah.

Just before sunrise the next day, David and his men attacked, fighting until sunset. At the end of the battle, the only Amalekites to escape were 400 raiders, who rode away on camels like frightened puppies with their tails between their legs.

David rescued his two wives and everyone else the Amalekites had taken from Ziklag. Not one person was missing—young or old, sons or daughters. David brought back everything that had been stolen, including their livestock.

He also took the Amalekites' sheep and cattle, keeping them separate from the others. Everyone agreed that these would be David's reward.

On the way back, David joined up with the 200 men he had left at Besor Brook. He greeted them warmly and asked how they were doing.

But David's other warriors were bitter. "Those men are weak and worthless! They didn't go with us to the battle, so why should they share in any of the possessions we took back from the Amalekites? Let these good-for-nothings take their wives and children and go—we don't need them!"

These 400 soldiers were proud of their recent success, and did not want to share.

But David, who reflected God's attitude of sharing, said, "Friends, do not be greedy with the blessings that God has given us! Remember that it was the Eternal who protected us and delivered our attackers into our hands. We deserve none of the credit. From this moment on, soldiers who stay behind to guard the camp and supplies will share in the same spoils as those who go into battle." This became a law for Israel.

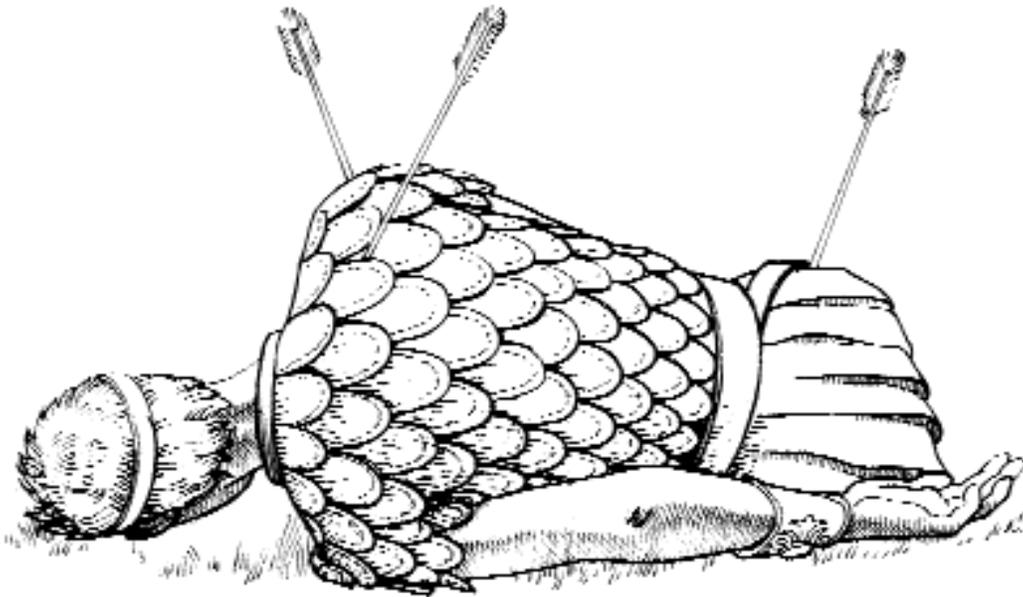
Through constantly being on the run from Saul, David learned to appreciate the kindness of others. And it taught him to be kind and merciful to those less fortunate. In this period of trial and tribulation, God was developing His holy, righteous character in David so that he would be a righteous king.

David, his men, and all their women and children went back to Ziklag with everything they had taken from the Amalekites.

He then sent some of these things as gifts to friends who were leaders in Judah (I Samuel 30:1-31). This made his fellow tribesmen love and respect David even more.

A Tragic End to Israel's First King

The Philistines were slaughtering the army of Israel at Mount Gilboa, causing the Israelites to run. In the chaos of clashing swords and



shields, and the cries of the dying, the Philistines soon closed in and killed Saul's sons. Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua were dead.

The fighting was fierce and heavy all around King Saul. As he lay on the ground, badly wounded by enemy arrows, Saul knew that this was the end. He had spent most of his reign disobeying God; thus, Saul knew that God would not save him.

The king turned to his armor bearer, and said, "Draw your sword, and kill me with it! Don't let me fall into the hands of these worthless Philistines so that they can torture and ridicule me!"

But the armor bearer was too afraid to slay the king.

Unlike David, Saul did not look to God for strength and courage. Instead, the king drew his own sword, and he thrust the blade into his body, and fell on it.

In killing himself, Saul disobeyed God once more. All life belongs to God—and only He has the right to take it.

Seeing that he was surrounded by bloodthirsty Philistines bent on Israel's destruction, the armor bearer followed Saul's desperate example and fell on his sword, too.

When the battle was finally finished, the Philistines praised their false gods and shouted for joy: Their enemy, King Saul, was dead. So were his three sons, Saul's armor bearer, and all the soldiers who had surrounded their king.

The Israelites dwelling on the other side of the Valley of Jezreel and the other side of the Jordan soon learned why the Philistines were celebrating. And when they saw that Israel's army had run away, the

Israelite villagers and townspeople ran away, too. Without the king and his army to protect them, everyone in the region felt helpless.

The Philistines immediately moved into the towns that the Israelites had left behind.

The day after the battle, the Philistines returned to the battlefield to take the weapons of the dead Israelite soldiers. There, they found Saul and his three sons lying dead on Mount Gilboa.

The Philistines wanted revenge. Just as Goliath, their fallen champion, had had his head cut off, they cut off the head of King Saul and pulled off his armor. Then they put his armor in the temple of their false goddess Astarte, and they nailed his body to the city wall of Beth Shan. They also sent messengers throughout Philistia to spread the “good” news in the temples of their idols and among their people.

Meanwhile, across the Jordan River, the townspeople of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul’s body. This was the town that had been destroyed years ago for deciding to stay out of the civil war between Israel and Benjamin.

The people of Jabesh wanted to show kindness to Saul and the tribe of Benjamin because Saul had rescued their town from the Ammonites early in his reign (I Samuel 11:9-12).

So one night, some brave men from Jabesh sneaked into Beth Shan, and boldly took down the bodies of Saul and his sons. Then they brought them back to Jabesh and burned them. They may have done this to hide the damage that had been done to Saul’s dead body, which was still missing its head.

They buried the bones under a small tree in Jabesh, and then fasted and mourned for seven days.

When God first picked him to be king, Saul was humble. He did not see himself as special or important.

But Saul did not keep this meek and selfless attitude. Just like Lucifer, who rebelled against God millions of years ago and became Satan the devil, Saul allowed the sin of pride to enter his mind. This led him to reject God and trust in himself. Sadly, Saul found out the hard way that the path of pride and vanity ultimately leads to destruction (I Samuel 31:1-13).

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

DAVID BECOMES KING

David's men informed him that a stranger had just stumbled into their camp. "His clothes are ripped, and he had dust on his head," they reported. Immediately, David knew that the stranger was mourning for the dead.

After being brought before David, the young man knelt down before him.

"Where did you come from?" David asked.

"From the army of Israel. We met the Philistines on the battlefield...and I barely escaped with my life!"

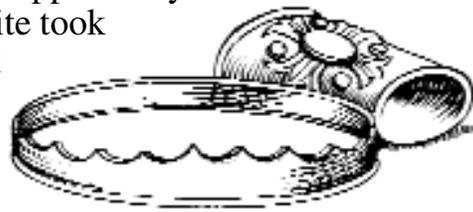
"What happened?" David said, leaning forward. "Who won the battle?"

The stranger said, "The Philistines came down upon us like locusts, causing our army to turn and run. The whole battlefield was filled with dead and dying warriors. Even worse—King Saul and his son Jonathan are dead. This was three days ago."

"What? This can't be! How do you know this?"

The young man answered, "I saw it with my own eyes. I was on Mount Gilboa and saw King Saul leaning on his spear. The enemy's war chariots and cavalry were closing in on him. When the king turned around and saw me, he called me over and asked who I was. I said, 'I'm an Amalekite.' Then Saul said, 'Kill me! I'm dying, and I'm in horrible pain.' So I carried out the king's command, and I killed him. He was too badly wounded to live much longer, anyway. Then I took Saul's crown and bracelet, and I have brought them to you, my lord. Here they are."

The Amalekite was lying. He probably did witness Saul take his own life, but the king did not ask *this* man to kill him—Saul had asked this of his *armor bearer*. Seeing an opportunity to benefit from Saul's death, the Amalekite took Saul's crown, bracelet and other royal items from the king's corpse. The Amalekite intended to use these items as proof that he had killed "David's enemy."



The tragic news of Saul and Jonathan's death, as well as the massacre of Israel's army, caused David and his soldiers to tear their clothes in sorrow. They mourned and wept throughout the day, denying themselves food and drink.

After this, David asked the young man where he was from. The man replied that he was an Amalekite, a foreigner living in Israel.

David thought about the many times Saul had wanted to kill him—yet he still honored the king's office and authority. And David expected others to do the same.

He stared into the Amalekite's eyes, pointed his finger, and said, "Why did you not fear to kill or even harm the Eternal's anointed? You even admitted what you did—therefore, your blood is on your own head!"

Then he shouted to one of his soldiers, "Execute this man at once!"

The Amalekite was shocked! He thought that he would benefit from his lie—yet his lie sentenced him to death instead! Telling the truth, no matter how painful it may seem, always sets people free from the way that leads to utter destruction (II Samuel 1:1-16).

The Song of the Bow

David mourned so deeply for Saul and Jonathan, he wrote a song in memory of them. He ordered his men to teach it to everyone in Judah. It eventually became a national anthem, or war song. David called it "The Song of the Bow," and it was written into the Book of Jashar, also known as the Book of the Upright. This was an ancient record of Israel's wars, archiving great events and the exploits of valiant men.

Here is the song:

"The beauty of Israel is slain upon your high places—how the mighty have fallen! Don't tell it in Gath, or publish it in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice and jump for joy.

"Let there be no dew nor rain upon the mountains of Gilboa, nor upon the fields of offerings. For the shield of the mighty is cast away, the shield of Saul, as though the king had never been anointed with oil.

"The bow of Jonathan spilled the blood of the slain, and pierced the fat of the mighty. And the sword of Saul cut apart the enemy. Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death, they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

"Women of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and other delights, who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!

“O Jonathan, you were slain in the heat of battle. I miss you most, and have loved you like a brother. You were more loyal and faithful to me than a wife to her husband. How the mighty are fallen, and the weapons of war perished!”

Inspired by God, David’s song reflected his gracious, forgiving attitude toward Saul, the man who had longed to see David dead. It also expressed his devotion to his best friend. The care and concern that Jonathan and David had for each other was noble and selfless. They were truly committed to each other’s well-being. Their friendship was a type of the close, bonding relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. And it is also the kind of close friendship God wants to have with every one of us—including you (II Samuel 1:17-27).

David, King of Judah

Without King Saul alive to threaten his life, David could safely return to Israel. But he did not rely upon himself. Wanting God’s direction, he asked the Eternal, “Should I go back to any of the towns and villages of Judah?”

God answered, “Yes, go up.”

David asked, “Where should I go?”

“To Hebron,” God replied. This was the highest elevation of any town in Judah, and about 20 miles away from Jerusalem.

So David obediently went to Hebron, taking with him his two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail. His men and their families came, too, and moved into the neighboring villages of Hebron.

Upon his arrival, all the people of Judah welcomed David back home. The elders and leaders met with him at Hebron and poured olive oil on his head. They officially anointed David as the new king of Judah.

“All hail the king!” the people cheered.

After the royal coronation, David was told that the people of Jabesh had bravely sneaked behind enemy lines, taken down the bodies of Saul and his sons, and buried them.

David was relieved. “At least these pagan Philistines won’t be using Saul’s body as a war trophy anymore,” he said.

To show his appreciation, he sent messengers to Jabesh to deliver this message: “May the Eternal bless you for the kindness you have shown to Saul your ruler by burying him. I hope that God will be just as kind and faithful to you. Please count me as your friend because of what you have done. Saul, your master, is dead, but the tribe of Judah has made me their king. So be strong and courageous.”

Meanwhile, Abner, Saul's cousin and the commanding general of Israel's army, did not accept David as the rightful leader of Israel.

Since Jonathan was Saul's firstborn son, Abner realized that Jonathan's son Mephibosheth should be the next in line to sit on the throne. He had not been able to walk since he was five years old. It happened when someone from Jezreel told his nurse that Saul and Jonathan had died. She hurried off with the boy in her arms, but he fell and injured his legs.

Abner and the other leaders reasoned that the Israelites needed a strong leader over them—someone who could lead them into battle. Thus, Mephibosheth was not allowed to be king.

During the first five years or so of David's reign in Judah, Abner and Ishbosheth, Saul's only surviving son, led their troops to take back the northern territory of Israel, which had been seized by the Philistines. Once this and the territory west of the Jordan River were again united, Abner took Ishbosheth to Mahanaim, a Levite town in Gilead (Joshua 21:28; I Chronicles 6:80), and made Saul's son king of Israel. This included the areas of Gilead, Asher, Jezreel, Ephraim, and Benjamin.

But God was not behind Abner and Ishbosheth's decision (II Samuel 2:1-11; 4:4).

A Bloody Contest

There was hostility between the house of Judah, ruled by David, and the house of Israel, ruled by Ishbosheth. And throughout the land, the Israelites were divided, some saying, "I follow David!" while others said, "I follow the son of Saul!"

One day, Abner and a small team of soldiers left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon. (Because of a promise Joshua had made with their forefathers, the Gibeonites were allowed to live in Israel – see Joshua 9.)

Meanwhile, Joab, the commander of Judah's army and a nephew to the king, also led a small team of David's soldiers on a mission to Gibeon. Joab's brothers, Abishai (the one who had accompanied David into Saul's camp) and Asahel, were with him.

The two opposing armies came to refresh at a watering pool in Gibeon. Abner and his men sat down on one side of the pool, while Joab and his men sat on the other side, surprised to see each other.

Tension grew as every warrior stared at his opponent.

Then Abner yelled over to Joab, "Wouldn't a contest of champions be better than an all-out war? Let's have some of our best soldiers get up and fight each other!"

Joab agreed. Twelve of Ishbosheth's men got up to fight 12 of David's men. They tugged and pulled each other by the hair, and each man stabbed the other in the side with small swords. All 24 warriors died on the spot. Because of this, the place came to be called "Helkath Hazzurim"—"Field of Sharp Swords."

Abner and Joab's contest of champions had settled nothing. It only fueled more hatred between the opposing sides, causing the soldiers to grab their weapons and fight. It was a fierce and bloody battle, but David's warriors eventually gained the upper hand and defeated Abner and the soldiers of Israel. The survivors ran for their lives, with David's troops in hot pursuit.

Now Asahel was single-minded. He was determined to kill Abner and take his armor as a trophy. So Asahel ran straight after Abner, running as fast as a wild gazelle in an open field.

Abner heard something behind him. He turned and saw that one of David's men was right on his heels.

He said, "Who is that? Is that you, Asahel?"

Joab's brother said, "Yes, it's me."

Abner kept running, fighting to move his legs faster and faster—but Asahel would not let up.

So Abner tried to warn him away. "Look around you, Asahel! There are plenty of soldiers for you to chase. Stop chasing after me and fight one of them! If you want someone's armor and weapons for yourself, pick someone else."

But Asahel refused.

Abner said, "Asahel, you better turn back, or else I'll have to kill you! Then I could never face your brother Joab again. He would hunt me down out of revenge."

But Asahel still refused.

Abner thought, "It's either my life or his," so he took the back end of his spear and struck Asahel in the stomach. The spear went all the way through and came out of his back. Asahel fell down and died.

All those who saw Asahel lying dead stopped in their tracks and stood there in disbelief. But Joab let out an angry cry of rage, then he and his brother Abishai raced after Abner.

By sunset, they came to the hill of Ammah. Abner assembled his men on top of a hill, and they got ready to fight. Then he shouted over to Joab, "When are we going to stop killing each other? The longer we keep on doing this, the worse it's going to be when the battle is finished. We are your brother Israelites—when are you going to order your men to stop chasing us?"

Reluctantly, Joab listened to reason. Feeling worn and tired, he

answered, “As God lives, if you had not spoken, my men would have chased you all night!”

Then he blew his trumpet and signaled his soldiers to halt. Immediately, the fighting stopped.

As Abner and his troops marched back to Mahanaim, Joab counted his troops and found that there were 19 missing besides Asahel. Even though the soldiers of King David had killed 360 of Abner’s men, Joab and Abishai still wanted to avenge their brother’s death.

“One day, we’ll get Abner,” Joab said to Abishai. “Just you wait and see.”

Then Joab and his troops carried Asahel’s body to Bethlehem and buried him in the family burial place. Afterward, they marched throughout the night until they reached Hebron, before sunrise.

This battle was the beginning of a long war between those who followed King David and those who were loyal to Ishbosheth, Saul’s son. As time passed, Ishbosheth’s power and influence grew weaker, while David’s grew stronger (II Samuel 2:1-32; 3:1).

David’s Growing Family

David wholeheartedly followed God in almost every area of his life, yet he was still human. This meant that, like all human beings, David had certain flaws and weakness. And one of these was his unwise desire to be married to more than one woman at a time. This was sin—breaking God’s Law (I John 3:4).

David’s weakness for women led to him to be married to multiple wives, who in turn had several children born to him. And, because of human nature, it was only natural for envy, jealous, pride and bitterness to boil between David’s many wives and children. They all competed for his attention and affection.

Satan decided to use this to his own advantage. Though the devil had been unsuccessful in using Saul to destroy David, he devised a scheme to strike at the king of Judah through David’s growing, expanding family. The deadly fruit of Satan’s evil plan would take years to reveal itself. You will read about it in the next volume of *The Story of the Bible*.

King David had several children born to him during the seven and a half years he reigned from Hebron. His oldest son was Amnon, whose mother was Ahinoam, and his second son was Chileab, whose mother was Abigail. David’s third son was Absalom, whose mother was Maacah, the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur. David’s fourth son was Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith. The fifth was

Shephatiah, whose mother was Abital, and the sixth son was Ithream, whose mother was Eglah (II Samuel 3:2-5).

Abner Defects

As the war continued between the house of David and the house of Saul, Abner gained more military power and political influence than ever. And Ishbosheth began to worry.

One day, spies reported to Ishbosheth that Abner had marriage-like, intimate relations with one of Saul's concubines.

"And of course you know what that means," they said. "To do something as bold and sinful as this means that Abner plans to remove you from the throne and crown himself king!"

Ishbosheth was angry. He had Abner brought to him, and accused him of the sin. "How dare you!" he said. "Who do you think you are?"

But Abner was angry, too.

"What?" he said. "After all I've done for you, you talk to me like I'm some kind of worthless dog from Judah? I've been nothing but loyal to you and your father's family and friends. If I wanted to, I could have turned you over to David, but I didn't. And now you speak to me as if I've committed a crime with this woman. May God punish me if I don't help David rule both Israel and Judah, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south—just like the Eternal promised him!"

Filled with fear, Ishbosheth was speechless as he watched Abner depart.

Feeling betrayed, Abner thought about his future. He knew that Ishbosheth was a weak ruler and that, sooner or later, David would take his throne. Abner wanted to be on the winning side.

So he sent some messengers to tell David that he wanted to make a peace agreement with him. "I will use my power and influence to persuade everyone in Israel to accept you as their king."

If he could pull this off, Abner knew that he would be highly praised and honored for bringing all of Israel under David's rule.

King David accepted Abner's proposal, adding that his first wife, Michal, must be brought back to him first. David wanted to right a wrong that Saul had done to him. David also knew that, in the eyes of many loyal to the house of Saul, having Saul's daughter as his wife again would strengthen his claim to the throne.

Not wanting another bloody battle on his hands, Ishbosheth sent some of his men to take his sister Michal away from her new husband, Paltiel. As the men carried her away, Paltiel followed them all the way to Bahurim, just east of Jerusalem, weeping as he walked. But when

Abner saw him, he ordered Paltiel to go back home.

Next, Abner met with the elders of the tribes of Israel. He reminded them that, for a long time, they wanted to make David their king.

“Now is the time,” he said. “Remember: God promised to use His servant David to deliver His people Israel out from the hand of their enemies—especially from the Philistines.”

The elders agreed with Abner’s plan. Abner also had similar success in a meeting with the elders of Benjamin. Then he and twenty soldiers left for Hebron to tell David the good news.

Upon their arrival, King David honored them with a great feast.

Afterward, Abner said to David, “My lord, allow me to leave and bring Israel here to make a covenant with you. Then you will be king over the whole nation, just as you’ve been wanting for these past years.”

David bid him farewell, and Abner left in peace (II Samuel 3:6-21).

Deception, Intrigue and Revenge

Meanwhile, Joab and some of his soldiers had come back to Hebron from a mission. As they took inventory of the many things they had seized from an enemy village, someone told Joab about Abner’s recent visit.

Still angry over his brother’s death, Joab went to David and said, “What have you done? Why did you let Abner come in here, and then let him go? Abner is a deceiver—he came to trick you! All he wanted was to find out how strong your army is and to know everything you’re doing.”

The king tried to calm his nephew down, but Joab would not listen. Instead, he devised a plan to get Abner once and for all.

Unbeknownst to David, Joab sent some messengers to catch up with Abner. “King David needs your advice. Come back to Hebron. It’s urgent.”

Abner agreed, and went back with the messengers until they came to a well at Sirah, which was about two and a half miles outside of Hebron. He was surprised to see that Joab and Abishai were waiting for him.

Before Abner could suspect anything, Joab pretended he needed to talk with him in private. “It’s about this deal you made with King David.”

Abner allowed Joab to take him into a small room that was part of the town gate. Then suddenly, Joab’s friendly demeanor changed into a fury of violence. He pulled out a small sword and stabbed Abner in the stomach.

Joab stared into his eyes, and said, “This is for killing my brother!”
Abner crumpled to his knees in great agony, and then died.

When King David learned about Abner’s murder, he said to the people, “As the Eternal is my Witness, my kingdom and I are completely innocent of Abner’s death! Let the blame fall on the guilty—Joab and his family. May they always be sick with sores and other skin diseases, and may they all be cowards who die in war or from starvation.”

Then David ordered Joab and his men to show sorrow by tearing their clothes and wearing sackcloth. “Then walk before Abner’s body and mourn!”

“But he killed Asahel,” Joab protested, “our own flesh and blood.”

“Your lust for revenge has blinded you, Joab. Abner killed your brother in self-defense. But you murdered Abner in cold blood—and even deceitfully used my name to do so!”

All the people followed David’s example, and mourned and wept over Abner’s death.

Then the king sang a funeral song:

“Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound nor were your feet put into fetter; as a man falls before the wicked, so you fell.”

This made everyone weep again, as Abner was buried in the city.

Afterward, servants brought food to David, but the king refused to eat. “Don’t you realize that one of Israel’s great leaders has died today? How can I eat or drink when Abner has been taken from us?” he replied. So he fasted for the rest of the day.

The people were impressed by David’s humble attitude and caring example. There was no longer any doubt that King David had absolutely nothing to do with Abner’s murder.

David told his officials, “I may be God’s anointed, but Joab and Abishai have more power than I do. May God pay them back for their evil.”

Joab and Abishai had more supporters than David did, who was still gathering power. This kept David from immediately dealing with them according to what their treachery deserved (II Samuel 3:22-39).

CHAPTER EIGHTY

DAVID RULES ALL OF ISRAEL

Upon learning that Abner had been murdered in Hebron, Ishbosheth felt like giving up. The news troubled everyone in Israel, for they realized that Abner had been their kingdom's source of stability and leadership.

One day about noon, Rechab and Baanah, two brothers who were captains of the king's troops, went to Ishbosheth's house, pretending to get some wheat for their soldiers. Since it was a hot day, Ishbosheth rested in his bedroom.

Once they were inside, Rechab and Baanah sneaked into the private chambers and stabbed Ishbosheth to death. Then they cut off his head and took it with them, escaping through the Jordan River valley all that night. Their plan was to take Ishbosheth's head to King David and gain his favor.

Upon arriving in Hebron, the two brothers were brought before David. They flashed a vicious smile, and said, "My lord, we have brought you the head of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy. God has finally let you get even with the house of Saul."

Rechab and Baanah were surprised to see that David was not celebrating. They were even more surprised by David's answer:

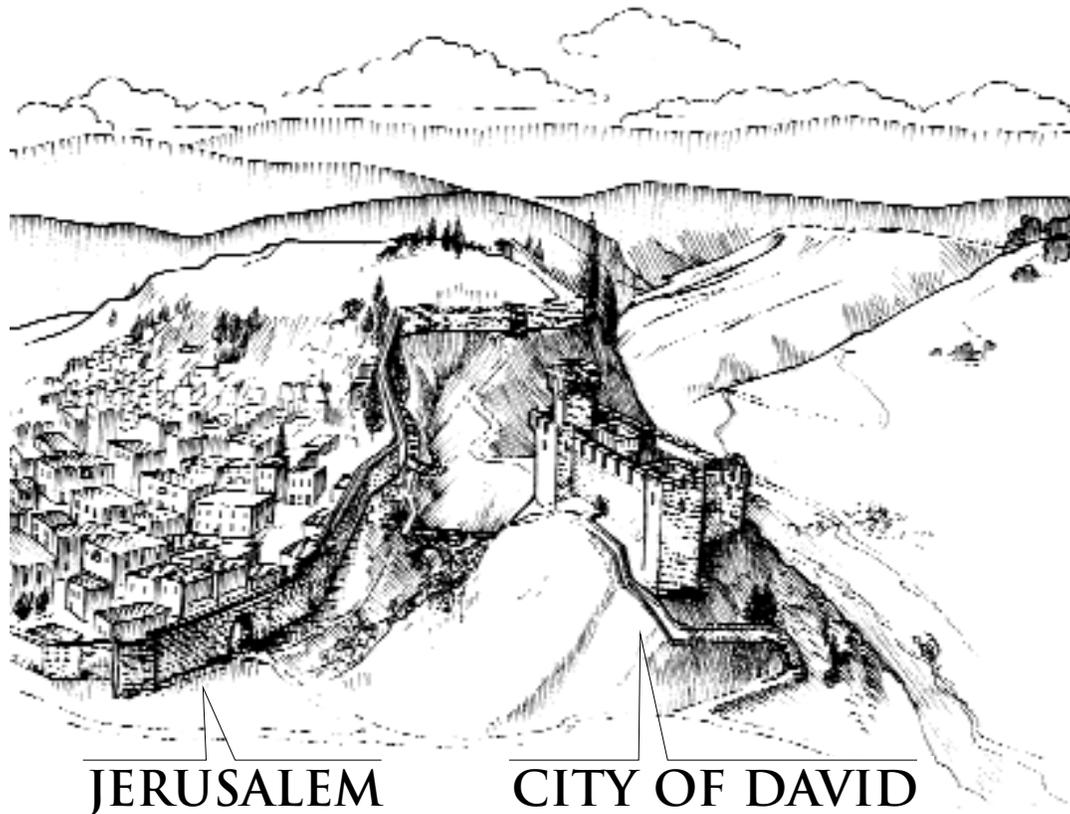
"When a man came to Ziklag and reported that Saul was dead, he thought that I should reward him for his so-called good news. But I executed him on the spot, instead! And now you wicked and perverse men have done more evil than that man did. You killed a righteous man in his own house and on his own bed. For this, I will make you pay for spilling his blood. I'll wipe you from the face of the earth!"

Rechab and Baanah trembled in their boots. This was not the response they had expected.

The king turned to his troops, and said, "Kill these two! And cut off their hands and feet and hang their bodies by the pool."

David's soldiers quickly obeyed.

Then David had Ishbosheth's head buried in Abner's tomb (II Samuel 4:1-2).



Capturing the City of Jerusalem

All the elders of the tribes of Israel came to Hebron to meet with King David. They reminded him that they were his brother Israelites, and that they remembered how David had successfully led their nation into battle when Saul was king.

“And the Eternal promised that you would someday rule Israel,” they said, “and take care of us like a shepherd.” They decided to follow Abner’s example and accept David as their ruler.

So David made a covenant with them, asking God to be their witness. Then the elders anointed David’s head with olive oil. He was now the king of Israel. The 12 tribes of Israel were finally unified under David’s rule.

David was 30 years old when he became king, and lived to rule for forty years. During the first seven and a half years, he only ruled Judah. Then he moved to Jerusalem, where he ruled both Israel and Judah for 33 years (II Samuel 5:1-3).

The New Capital of Israel

King David was becoming a great and powerful ruler. This was because the Eternal God was on his side. Unlike Saul, David did not forget that God was the true Source of his success.

The city of Jerusalem was still occupied by the Jebusites, pagan worshippers who were determined not to leave. But David had other plans for them. He led his army to surround Jerusalem and attack.

Confident in their own strength, the Jebusites did not think David could break through the city's walls, so they mocked him, saying, "Go away! You're wasting your time. You can't get in here! Even if we were blind or lame, we could fend off your weak attacks!"

The Jebusites did have a point. Jerusalem was a heavily defended city, and had successfully put down many attacks from the past. David knew this, so he came up with a plan.

The king instructed his troops to secretly enter the city's water tunnels, which ran from the outside into Jerusalem.

The plan worked. David and his soldiers sneaked into the city, and then attacked, capturing the stronghold on Mount Zion. God delivered Jerusalem into David's hand.

Once the city was firmly under his control, David decided to live there. He named the stronghold the "City of David." Then he started rebuilding, beginning with the landfill to the east.

In addition to being favored by God, David also had a good reputation among men. Among them was King Hiram of Tyre, a prosperous Phoenician seaport off the great Mediterranean Sea. Hiram sent some of his officials, carpenters and stone workers, along with cedar logs, and built David a royal palace.

Upon moving the capital of Israel from Hebron to Jerusalem, King David married more wives and concubines, who gave him many more children.

The Philistines heard that David was now the king of Israel, and they were not happy with his success. Realizing that he would no longer be their servant as they had planned, the Philistines sent troops to try and capture him. But David found out and went into his stronghold.

The Philistines camped in the Rephaim Valley. Also known as the Valley of the Giants, this fertile plain of farmlands lay southwest of Jerusalem, on the border between the territories of Benjamin and Judah.

When he heard about this, David asked God, "Should I attack the Philistines? Will You deliver them into my hand?"

God told David, “Go up and attack! I will give you the victory.”

David believed God, and attacked the Philistines, thoroughly defeating them. He named the place Baal Perazim—“Master of Breakthroughs”—explaining, “The Eternal has broken through my enemies before me, like a breakthrough of water.”

David and his troops also carried away the idols that the Philistines had left behind and burned them (I Chronicles 14:12).

Seeking revenge, the Philistines came back and camped in Rephaim Valley.

Again, David faithfully relied on God and asked Him what he should do.

Following God’s instructions, David and his army circled around behind the enemy and waited until they heard the sound of troops marching through the tops of the trees. That was God’s sign that He had marched out ahead of David’s army to strike the Philistines’ camp. David launched a lightning attack and defeated the enemy. He and his men even chased the Philistines all the way from Geba to the entrance to Gezer, 20 miles away, and drove them back to their own territory (II Samuel 5:4-25)!

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