HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN!

As we begin our study in 2 Sam, bear in mind that in the original Hebrew text there was just one book of Samuel. The Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, was the first version to divide the material into two parts, First and Second Samuel. First Samuel deals with the end of the period of the judges, Samuel being the last of the judges, and Israel’s first king, King Saul. Second Samuel focuses on the reigns of David and Solomon as kings of Israel. So, as we pick up the action in 2 Sam Ch 1, the narrative flows uninterrupted from 1 Sam 31. As 1 Sam ends, King Saul and his three sons have been killed in battle. They had been warring against the Philistines in the northern part of Israel on Mount Gilboa. But in one fierce day of fighting they’d all been killed. The Philistines celebrated when they found Saul’s lifeless body. They cut off his head and stripped off his armor (revenge for what Israel had done with their champion Goliath 16 years earlier). In one final act of disrespect, the Philistines took Saul’s and his son’s dead bodies and fastened them to the city wall of Beth-shan. When word about what the Philistines had done reached the people of Jabesh-gilead, they took immediate action. They had never forgotten what Saul did for them 40 years before (1 Sam 11) when he saved them from the Ammonites. The men of Jabesh-gilead traveled the 15 miles to Beth-shan. Under the cover of darkness they removed Saul’s and his son’s bodies from the city walls. They then transported them back to Jabesh where they received a decent burial.

Meanwhile David has yet to receive the news of Saul’s and Jonathan’s deaths. He is completely unaware of the events that had transpired up on Mount Gilboa. In fact, David and his men have just returned home from their own battle down south and are celebrating a significant military victory against the Amalekites. Little does David know what has happened to Saul and his sons. As 2 Sam opens, David receives the news…

READ 2 Sam 1:1-10

This Amalekite’s version of events differs from the narrative about Saul’s death found in 1 Sam Ch 31. There we’re told that Saul, having been mortally wounded in the fighting (struck by a Philistine arrow), ordered his armor bearer to run him thru with his sword. But the armor bearer refused. “But his armor bearer would not, for he feared greatly.” Why was the armor bearer afraid to kill Saul? Saul apparently is so badly wounded that he’s going to die anyway. So why was he afraid? Because Saul was the Lord’s anointed. Not even David, who had good reason to want Saul dead (Saul was trying to kill David). Not even David, though twice given the golden opportunity to kill Saul, would do it. Why not? Because David feared God and Saul was the Lord’s anointed king. It didn’t matter how badly Saul behaved, David knew that Saul had been placed in that sacred position, leader of God’s covenant nation, the King of Israel. David knew that that Saul had been sanctioned by holy God to be the king. When the armor bearer refused to kill the king, we’re told in the 1 Sam 31 acct that Saul fell on his own sword, in effect, killing himself.

But that is NOT the story the Amalekite messenger tells David, is it?

We know that one of these 2 accts is untrue. And since the writer of 1 Sam (either Nathan or Gad according to 1 Chron 29) penned his account under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, I’m going to go out on a limb and say that the account in 1 Sam 31 where Saul kills himself by falling on his sword is the factual one while the Amalekite is lying to David. In his own mind perhaps this Amalekite thinks David will be pleased with the news of Saul’s death (it was common knowledge that Saul and David were enemies). Perhaps the Amalekite thinks David will be happy and reward him. Well, the Amalekite completely misjudged David’s reaction!

READ 2 Sam 1:11-12

So this is NOT good news for David. And not just because his best friend, Jonathan, has been killed, though that grieves David deeply. But the nation of Israel has lost their king. And not only that, but their king, the Lord’s anointed, has been killed by the enemy of Israel. The nation mourns for their fallen king. David and his men and the entire nation are grief stricken. This is not a happy day at all.

READ 2 Sam 1:13

Why would David ask this Amalekite where he came from? Why is that relevant? Because if he’s just some foreigner who happened by and didn’t know any better (acting out of ignorance), David would cut him some slack. But that’s not the case. This Amalekite tells David that he’s the son of a sojourner. In other words, he’s been living in the land of Israel for a while now, in fact, a second generation resident. So he would have been fully knowledgeable about the sacred nature of the Israelite king. He would have known that you don’t touch the Lord’s anointed.

Before we continue, let me make a few points. Whenever you read and study the O.T., it’s important to understand what God has revealed to His people up to that point in history. You see, God is constantly revealing more and more about Himself, His nature, His plans and His desires for His people. Up to this point in history, 1011 B.C., God has led His covenant people from Egyptian bondage to the Promised Land. He’s given them a nation and established civil and ceremonial laws. He has told His people what He expects of them. They are to be a distinct and holy people, totally devoted to Him, to Yahweh, and to Him alone. The people are aware that it is God’s plan to someday establish His Messiah to rule over the nation of Israel, to destroy the evil one, to redeem this fallen creation. That’s God’s plan from way back in Genesis. As N.T. believers living more than 3000 years after David, we know a lot more about God and His redemptive plan. We have the entire canon of scripture, 66 books of the Bible readily available at our fingertips. We have the advantage of being able to look back over thousands of years of history. We all know that the promised Messiah being anticipated by the people in David’s time was Jesus of Nazareth. Right? We know that. But did they know all this in David’s time? Did they know it would be another 1000 years or so until the Messiah came? No. All they knew is what God had promised, that He would send a Messiah, a Redeemer. But God never told His people explicitly WHEN that would happen. Just that it would. *[it is similar to how we view the second coming of Jesus]* So years and years of history, painful rebellious history, pass and each generation of Israelites wonder to themselves, “When is our Messiah, our Deliverer coming?” Well, we know the answer to that. Jesus finally bursts forth onto the scene as a baby as the scripture says, “in the fullness of time.” God had a perfect timetable and eventually He sent His Son, Jesus, on His mission of redemption. In David’s time, here in 2 Samuel, the people are still looking for their Messiah. Up to this point in history they’ve had some real possibilities come along, good godly men – Noah, Job, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel. And now here’s David, “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:13, Acts 13:22). And even though we realize that later David’s sinful behavior will disqualify him from being the Messiah, the Promised One, the Redeemer that the people of Israel were looking for, David offers us glimpses of what the future Messiah will be like. I’m going to stop short of calling David a type of Christ. Instead let me just say that David frequently exemplifies the holy character of God.

READ 2 Sam 1:14-16

Do you think David is too harsh or does he act appropriately? His actions are appropriate. He administers justice. He carries out the judgment of God upon the Amalekite who had basically doomed himself by his own testimony. Whether the Amalekite was telling the truth or not isn’t at issue here. David treats his story, his own testimony as though it had really happened. The Amalekites words revealed his arrogance and selfishness and demonstrated a lack of obedience in following God’s will.

David’s anger burned against this man who had dared to strike the Lord’s anointed. His action reveals God’s character, a holy hatred for sin. And so does Jesus. We know that when Jesus comes back the second time, Rev 19:15 says, “From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations and He will rule them with a rod of iron.” And even when He came the first time we saw Jesus demonstrate God’s righteous indignation when He drove the money changers from the Temple. John 2:15-17: “And making a whip of cords, [Jesus] drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And He poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And He told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make My Father's house a house of trade.’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume Me.’”

In the last part of Ch 1 (our quarterly’s focus) V 17-27, David writes a song of lament for both Saul and Jonathan – “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished!” The once mighty King Saul, ruler of Israel, is now dead. This is a reminder to all of us of the fragile nature and brevity of life, no matter who we are – whether king or peasant, rich or poor, a believer in God or an unbeliever, a Republican or a Democrat… the Bible tells us “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” (Heb 9:27)

So David writes this song to remember Israel’s fallen heroes, Saul and Jonathan. We just celebrated Memorial Day last week. That’s a day we Americans set aside to remember those who died in defense of our freedoms. Here at the end of Ch 1 David writes a song, a lasting tribute, a memorial to Saul and Jonathan. Saul had a lot of negative character traits (we mentioned those in our study of 1 Sam). But what David remembers is the positive ones. So, much like our modern eulogies, David focuses on Saul’s good points. Saul was a mighty warrior, a brave and powerful king. “Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.” During Saul’s reign the nation experienced prosperity and stability and up until the end of Saul’s reign they had peace. And, of course, in this song David extols his love for his best friend, Jonathan. He writes this song to help the nation to remember these two mighty men, these servants of God.

OK, so you might think that with Saul dead, David would jump at the opportunity to seize the throne of Israel. After all it’s now been 18 years since David was anointed by Samuel to be king. He’s 30 years old now. He’s been told many times during these 18 years that he would be the future king of Israel. Samuel announced this to Saul and to David’s family (1 Sam 13 and 16); Jonathan acknowledges it to David (1 Sam 20:13, 23:17); Saul himself mentions it to David (1 Sam 24:20); David’s future wife Abigail spoke of it in 1 Sam 25:29-30. Acting in the flesh David might just think, “OK, now is my opportunity!” But one of the things that distinguishes David from Saul, character-wise, is that David seeks the Lord’s will while Saul did NOT. Notice how Ch 2 begins…

READ 2 Sam 2:1

“After this…” After a period of mourning Saul’s and Jonathan’s deaths

David probably went thru Abiathar the priest and his trusted spiritual advisor in seeking God’s direction.

READ 2 Sam 2:2-4a

“So David went up there…” He is obedient to follow God’s direction.

So after years of waiting David finally becomes king, but he’s not the king of the entire nation of Israel (as was foretold by all those people I just mentioned. He is only the king of Judah, one tribe out of the 12. That was by God’s direction. David doesn’t try to force himself on the rest of the nation. At this point the other tribes are not following God’s will. They do not recognize David as their king. Perhaps that’s because of their loyalty to Saul. Conventional practice of the day by the surrounding nations (this was a first in Israel’s history that a king had died) was that when a king died you put up one of the king’s relatives – they became the new king, usually a son if they had one or it could be a nephew or a brother or whoever. So, Abner, who was Saul’s former military commander (he somehow had escaped the carnage on Mount Gilboa several years before) promotes putting Saul’s son Ish-bosheth on the throne. More about this in a minute.

I said that when David became king he didn’t force himself on the rest of the nation. For now he’s content to follow God’s will as King of Judah. I personally believe this is God’s way of training David to be the king of the entire nation later on. But David does reach out to the people of Jabesh-gilead, those who would have been among Saul’s staunchest supporters.

READ 2 Sam 2:4b-7

David wants to win the people of Israel over to his side, not force them into submission, not taking the throne by force. I thought about how much like Jesus this is. Jesus leaves heaven and comes down to planet earth as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, their rightful king. When He is born He is in the royal lineage of David. He presents Himself to His people, ministers to them, teaches them truth, heals diseases, casts out demons, raises the dead, and does many, many wondrous signs to validate His claims about who He is. Jesus never forces Himself on anyone. He still doesn’t. The truth of God stands on its own. No need to be heavy handed. His invitation is always extended, “Come.” When Jesus came the first time he didn’t rule with a rod of iron but with a gentle touch and a loving word. He came as a humble servant. That is the manner in which David proceeds as King of Judah and in doing so he exemplifies the very heart of God.

The rest of Ch 2 on into Ch 3, I’ll admit is rather convoluted. Several bizarre events take place, none of which are good. Five years into his reign Israel finally selects their king and it’s not David. As mentioned before it is Saul’s son Ish-bosheth, basically a puppet king who can be controlled by Abner. Abner is the power broker. He’s the one pulling all the strings. I view Abner as the human servant of Satan. Abner is out to thwart God’s plan. Abner knows – yes, he is well aware – that it is David who God wants to be king over all of Israel, not Ish-bosheth. But does Abner care? No. He blocks David from being king because of his own selfish ambitions. He wants to be in control. By the way, how do we know that Abner is aware that it is God’s will for David to be king? Because he says so later on with his own mouth…

READ 2 Sam 3:9-10

These are Abner’s own words. He knows God’s will but despite this he goes against it. This is, of course, what Satan does all the way thru scripture as he seeks to hinder God’s will from being accomplished in this world. Satan always has an anti-God, anti-Christ person operating. We see this throughout history. And at this time that person is Abner.

I mentioned several events in Ch 2 that are rather bizarre and you read them and you say, “Why?” You read these accounts and you scratch your head. There seems to be no point to them. In one event Abner, who had been Saul’s general and Joab, David’s general, decide to settle the conflict between David and Saul’s family with a little contest. Twelve men from each side are selected and the idea is that they will face off in a mini-battle and whoever wins it will be their king, either David or Ish-bosheth, who rules the nation. What happens? The battle is so fierce that all 24 combatants kill each other. No survivors. Nothing is decided. Like I said, it’s rather bizarre and pointless.

In another strange event Abner is in his chariot or on horseback and he is being pursued on foot rather aggressively by a man named Asahel, Joab’s brother. He is a track star, a very fast runner. He’s described in v 18 as “swift of foot as a wild gazelle.” Abner becomes a bit irritated with this guy following him and he warns Asahel to back off. But he doesn’t. So Abner ends up striking Asahel in the stomach with his spear and kills him. So Joab, upset at what Abner has done to his brother, pursues Abner and tries to kill him. As a result of the personal tensions between Abner and Joab hundreds of Israelite men end up dying in battle, a civil war of sorts. Ch 3 opens with the words, “There was a long war between the house of Saul and house of David.” Most of this was precipitated by the the self-serving actions of both Abner and Joab. V 1 of Ch 3 goes on to say, “And David grew stronger and stronger while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.” So there is this approximately 2-yr long civil war in which a lot of men die and slowly David gains power while the house of Saul becomes weaker.

Another event that occurs is when Abner, always doing as he pleased, exercises free reign with no constraints, takes one of Saul’s concubines for himself. Her name is Rizpah. Because Ish-bosheth is the king by rights this concubine is part of his royal harem. She belongs to him. So Ish-bosheth confronts Abner about it. “What do you think you’re doing?” The two men have a falling out and in anger Abner parts ways on not-such-good terms with Ish-bosheth. Abner decides that he is now going to join David’s side. As we will see this proves to an unwise decision.

As part of David’s peace agreement with Abner (between him and the house of Saul), David demands that Michal, Saul’s daughter, David’s former wife, be brought to him to become another one of his wives. Remember, years before when Saul had taken Michal away from David and he had given her to be another man. So David’s terms are agreed to and Michal is taken away from her husband and becomes one of David’s wives. Why was this done? There is no indication in scripture that it was God-directed. Here David appears to act on his own merely for political expediency, not motivated by any love he had for Michal. I would argue that it was not in her best interests to be with David and undoubtedly she resented David because of it. There’s a disturbing scene in Ch 3, v 15-16. We are told, “And Ish-bosheth sent and took [Michal] from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. *[Paltiel is a real person with real feelings]* But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahurim…” This is not a good scene. It doesn’t make David look good. But all throughout this section are bizarre events just like this one.

So Abner comes to Hebron with 20 of his men and meets with David. “I’ll help you to rise to power throughout all of Israel.” David and Abner come to peaceful terms and Abner leaves. Joab returns from one of his raids and goes to David, “Hey what’s going on? Was that Abner I just saw?” Actually what Joab says to David is “What have you done?”

Well, at this point David has a problem. He has these two strong-willed, self-serving rival generals vying for power. And Joab is still looking for an opportunity to kill Abner. Abner hangs around Hebron. He doesn’t leave. Why? Because Hebron is one of the 6 designated cities of refuge set up by God in Joshua 20:7-8. Hebron is a safe zone from the avenging wrath of Joab. But Joab, just like Abner, demonstrates he could care less about what God wants. In the guise of having a private, peaceful conversation with Abner, Joab kills Abner. This violates God’s directive and when David finds out about it he is incensed. David and all the people of Israel mourned Abner’s death. Even though Abner was not a good guy his death at a time when he began to do the right thing in regard to David was a selfish act of revenge by Joab.

READ 2 Sam 3:36-39

David pronounces a curse on Joab and his descendants and turns him over to God for punishment.

So to wrap up our thoughts, just take a look at all the mess in Israel in these first few chapters. You have one selfish act after another, hurt feelings, senseless deaths, ignoring of God and His desires – on and on we could go. Yet, in spite of the poor choices and mess that man makes of things – and in our passage this morning there has been plenty of blame on both sides – in spite of all that ultimately God’s will and kingdom desires are accomplished according to His timetable. After 7 years of waiting, David finally becomes the king of all Israel.

Application: Even when everything in our life seems to go wrong and everywhere we look there is chaos; even when we have made a great big mess of things, God is still in charge. He is in control and He is sovereign – in all matters. And He uses imperfect and some improbably people to help accomplish His perfect will. I don’t know about you, but given what’s going on in our world today, I find a great assurance in that.

Well, a different kind of lesson today. It wasn’t heavy on doctrine like we saw in 2 Cor. Mostly we just read a narrative of some crazy events. But we can take away some truths about God and His character for our own lives. So what do you sing after a lesson like that?