

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



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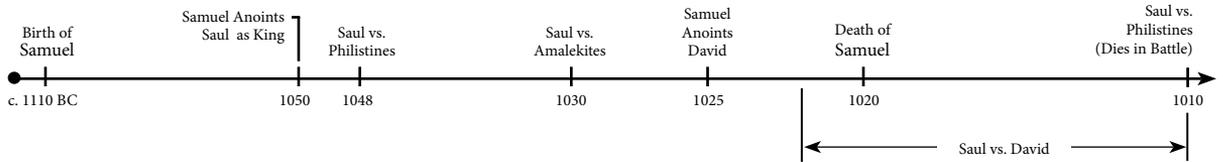
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The Flesh and the Spirit

First Samuel records the story of two men, Saul and David, who symbolize two principles at work in the heart of every Christian seeking to walk with God: the *principle of the flesh* and the *principle of faith*. Saul is a man of the flesh, a carnal believer. David is a man of faith, a spiritual believer.

In 1 Samuel, we see how these two principles, the principle of flesh and the principle of faith, come into dramatic conflict in our lives. We see in Saul the ruin caused by the will that is set on the flesh. In David, we see the blessings that result from a mind set on the Spirit. As Romans 8:6 tells us, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”

Both men are kings, illustrating the supremacy of the will in human life. When God created the human race, He gave us a supreme free will. Even the Spirit of God does not violate it. If we want to say “No” to God, we can. We rule over the kingdom of our lives, just as Saul and David ruled over their kingdoms.

Even though the book of Samuel is primarily about Saul and David, it opens with the story of the man who gives his

name to the book, Samuel. The prophet Samuel is the human expression of God’s voice to both Saul and David. The stories of these three men—Samuel, Saul, and David—mark the three divisions of the book. The first seven chapters give us the life of Samuel, chapters 8 through 15 present King Saul, the man of the flesh, and chapters 16 through 31, concern David, the man of faith, who symbolizes the mind that is set on the Spirit.

Samuel: The Judge-Prophet

Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. The events of this book take place after Israel has passed through some three hundred years of the rule of the judges. Samuel is God’s chosen instrument to close the era of the judges and introduce the era of the prophets and the monarchy.

The book opens with the story of a

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the two central themes found in the book of 1 Samuel, the principle of the flesh and the principle of faith. The central lesson of 1 Samuel is that the lives of those who rely on the flesh will end in tragedy, but God will use the lives of those who live by faith in mighty ways.

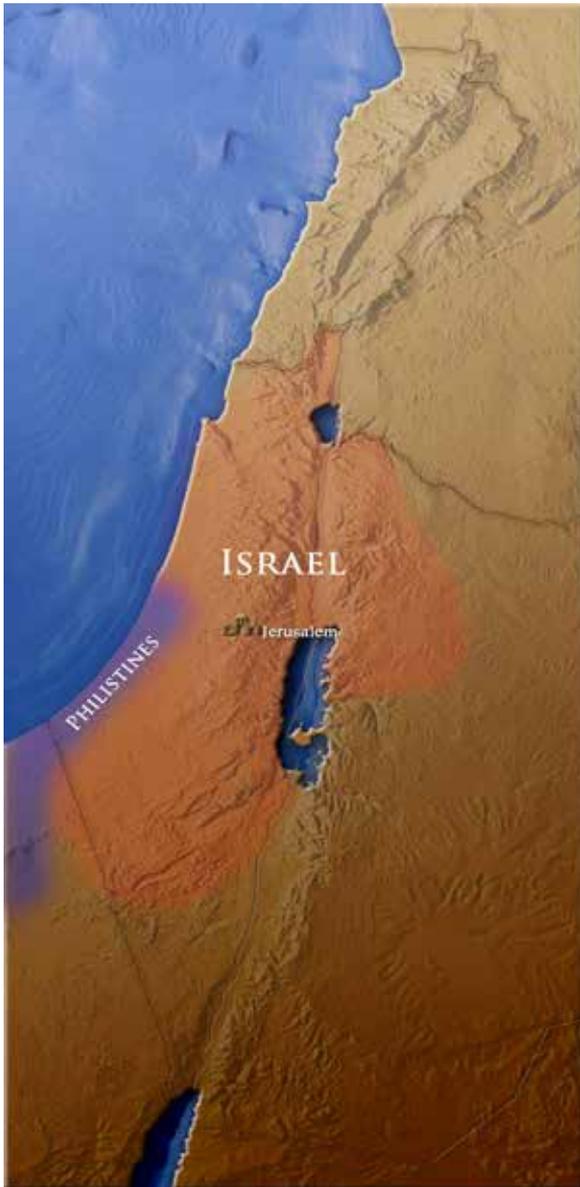
barren woman, Hannah, one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife had borne Elkanah numerous children, and she taunted and mocked Hannah in her barrenness. Hannah's barrenness is symbolic of the spiritual state of Israel at this time. God's chosen people had fallen into a state

of spiritual infertility and barrenness. The priesthood, which God had established along with the tabernacle and the Levitical law, was disintegrating. The cause for this failure is found in the song Hannah sings after her prayer is answered and she gives birth to a boy, Samuel. In her song, Hannah announces:

"Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength" (2:3-4).

Hannah goes on to sing that God exalts the lowly and casts down the proud. In this book we see the eternal conflict between the proud, self-sufficient heart and the humble spirit that depends on God. This was Israel's problem. The priesthood was failing not because of any flaw in the priestly institution (which God established to symbolize the coming ministry of Jesus the Messiah). Rather, the priesthood was failing because the people refused to bow before the Lord. They refused to come for cleansing. They refused to turn from idolatry. As a result, the priesthood was about to pass away as an effective means of mediation between God and His people.

At this point we have the account of Samuel's birth and childhood. When Samuel was just a boy, he was brought to the temple and dedicated to God. He becomes the voice of God to Eli the priest and receives a message of judgment. Later Samuel becomes the voice of God to the nation—and especially to the two kings, Saul and David.



The Capture of the Ark and the Decline of the Nation

The first seven chapters tell the story of Israel's decline. The most obvious mark of Israel's decline is the story of the ark of the covenant in chapters 3 through 6. The ark is the gilded chest containing the two tablets of the Law, which were inscribed by the finger of God on Mount Sinai. The ark was carried by the Israelites during their exodus in the wilderness, during their crossing of the Jordan, and during the conquest of Jericho. It has always represented God's presence among the Israelites, giving them the victory over their enemies.

But in 1 Samuel 4, the Philistines defeat the Israelites in battle and captured the ark of the covenant. Upon hearing of the capture of the ark, Eli—the Israelite priest and judge who trained young Samuel—fell and died. His priesthood was taken from him because he did not discipline his sons. And when Eli's grandson was born, his mother named him Ichabod, meaning “the glory has departed,” a reference to the loss of the ark.

The Philistines held the ark for seven months, taking it to several different sites. Wherever the Philistines set the ark, calamity befell them. The worst misfortune took place in the city of Ashdod. The Philistines placed the ark in the temple of their grotesque fish-god Dagon, but the next morning, the statue of Dagon lay facedown before the ark. The Philistines put the image of Dagon upright once more—but the next morning the image was again prostrate before the ark—this time in pieces. The fish-god could not stand in the presence of the ark.

The people also suffered outbreaks of

tumors or boils on their bodies and rats in their streets. The Philistines realized that they couldn't get away with trying to keep the ark of God in their own temple. So, after holding the ark for seven months, the Philistines returned it to Israel.

The ark was set in the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite. Out of curiosity, the men of Beth-shemesh looked into the ark—and were punished for their blasphemy. Seventy of them were struck down by the Lord. So, in chapter 7, the ark was taken to the house of Abinadab, whose son Eleazar was consecrated as the caretaker of the ark. It remained in the town of Kiriath Jearim, about seven miles west of Jerusalem, for the next twenty years.

In the course of these events, Israel reached one of the lowest ebbs in its national history.

Saul: Israel's First King—A Man of the Flesh

Next, we read about the entrance of King Saul—God's response to the demand of the people that they have a king like other nations:

All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:4-5).

Here we find the principle of the flesh at work in the nation of Israel. The fleshly, worldly mindset of the people is clearly at work to destroy Israel's fellowship with God and the people's enjoyment of His blessing. They rejected the authority of God in favor

of having a human king—the same kind of authority as all the other nations. In other words, the desire of the flesh is to live in a manner accepted by the world, to conduct its business as the rest of the world does.

You may have seen this principle at work in your church, where people may have wanted to interject worldly business principles into the conduct of the church rather than the principles of Scripture. Instead of relying on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we often prefer to appoint a committee to devise a program; then we ask God to bless our program and make it work. The problem is that it is our fleshly program, not God's spiritual program.

Someone has said, "Be careful what you ask for—you may get it." Here is a case that proves the saying true: Israel prays for a human king and God gives them one. Samuel was displeased when the people asked for a king, because he knew that this was not God's plan for Israel. When Samuel prayed to the Lord, the Lord replied:

"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do" (8:7–9).

This is always God's way. If we want something badly enough, He will usually give it to us—even if it is not His perfect will for our lives. The catch is that we must also be ready to face the consequences.

A true story: An eight-year-old child once begged her father for new skates. "The skates I have are too slow!" she said. "All the other kids have fast new ball-bearing skates!" Her father resisted and resisted, but the little girl kept begging for faster skates. She even pinned notes to his pillow at night: "Daddy, pretty please with sugar on top, buy me some new ball-bearing skates? Please! Please! Please!"

Finally, the father relented and bought her the new skates. The child gleefully put on the skates, zoomed out onto the sidewalk, and disappeared around the corner. The father heard a cry, followed by a sickening clatter. He ran around the corner and found his daughter on the sidewalk, unconscious. She had slipped on the faster skates and hit her head. The father rushed her to the hospital, but she died without ever regaining consciousness.

Sometimes we beg God for "ball-bearing skates" in our own lives. We think that God is unkind to say "No" to our repeated prayers. But sometimes a "No" answer is God's blessing to us—for if we continue to beg Him and He finally says "Yes," we may find ourselves enduring more tragedy and heartbreak than we ever imagined. That's the situation of the Israelites when God yielded to their demands for a king.

The story of Saul is the story of a young man who, like so many young people today, lived by the principle of the flesh, not the principle of faith. He did what *he* wanted to do, disregarding God's plan for his life. Young Saul was busy with his father in the donkey business. How did God reach Saul? He went into the donkey business Himself! He caused

Saul's donkeys to stray, forcing Saul to set out in search of the donkeys. After a fruitless search, Saul reached the town where Samuel lived.

In chapter 9, Saul was about to give up and go back home when his servant said, "Look, in this town there is a man of God. . . . Let's go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take" (9:6). Saul was not anxious to do this. In fact, he wanted to stay as far from the prophet as possible, because prophets were a disturbing sort of people. Saul just wanted to go home. But the servant prevailed on him to see Samuel—and to Saul's amazement, Samuel was expecting him.

God had told Samuel the day before to expect a visit from a young man named Saul. Samuel had a great dinner prepared for Saul and thirty invited guests. Saul was surprised to learn that he was the guest of honor. Those troublesome donkeys had gotten him into this and he wanted to get out of it as fast as possible.

Samuel took him aside as they finished the dinner and announced to him a stunning thing: "Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?" (10:1).

Saul had been out looking for donkeys, but he ended up as the king of Israel. He didn't even want the job! In fact, when Saul was on his way home, he encountered his uncle, who asked what had been happening in his life. Saul said he had gone out looking for the donkeys but had run into Samuel, who told him that the donkeys were safe at home.

Obviously, Samuel had told Saul a lot more than that. I doubt that it just slipped Saul's mind that Samuel had anointed and commissioned him as king of Israel—but he

didn't say a word about that. Saul was not interested in what God wanted him to do, unless he could use God for his own purposes.

The prophet Samuel's next step was to announce to Israel that God had heard their plea and would give them a king. Samuel called the people together to cast lots for the choice of a king. A lot was cast first to see from which tribe God would call the king: It was the tribe of Benjamin. Then which family group: It was the family of Kish. Finally, Saul was selected.

The word went out, "Has the man come here yet?" No one could find him. Finally, at the Lord's direction, they found him hiding among the baggage—a rather unlikely place to find a king.

Why did Saul hide? Was he shy? No, Saul hid because he didn't want to be inconvenienced by God's plan for his life. Saul wanted to live his life his own way and get away from God's call. Eventually, Saul was crowned king—and he looked the very picture of a king. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else, handsome as could be, a wise young man in many ways, and just.

But trouble was brewing as the Ammonites were amassing for war. Saul sent word to the people of Israel to come together. Thirty-six thousand men responded. They marched north and utterly destroyed the Ammonites in a great victory. Saul began to feel that serving God might be a good thing after all. Maybe he could use his new appointment for his own glory and advancement.

Next, Saul went to war against the Philistines, who aren't merely a tribe but the ancient equivalent of a superpower—heavily armed and fierce. The Philistines gathered

a force of thirty thousand iron chariots, six thousand horsemen, and an army too vast to number. When Saul saw the great horde of people advancing, he wondered if being king of Israel was such a great job after all.

Saul sent out word for more volunteers, just as he had when the Ammonites threatened; then he waited. And he waited. Where was the support? Where were the eager young soldiers?

Finally, a thousand men showed up, and then another thousand, and then another thousand. And that was it. No more came. He compared this pitiful force of three thousand soldiers with the Philistines' tremendous force. Then he sent for the prophet Samuel. In typical fashion, the man of the flesh depends upon his own resources until he gets into trouble; then he calls upon the Lord.

But God was ahead of Saul as usual, and Samuel delayed in coming. While Saul waited for Samuel to arrive, his soldiers began to slip away one by one and return home. His army dwindled from three thousand to two thousand to one thousand and finally to only six hundred men. By this time, Saul was getting desperate.

When Samuel had not come after five or six days, Saul took it upon himself to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. The moment he finished, Samuel came walking up. We read:

"What have you done?" asked Samuel.

Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command" (13:11-14).

Samuel prophesied that Saul's kingdom would be taken from him. Reading on, we find that God gave a great victory through Jonathan's faith and delivered the people from the vast horde of Philistines.

When at last the battle was won, Saul built an altar. It is the first altar that we are specifically told he built. Here is a man who thinks that the outward marks of faith are all that are necessary. Sadly, too many believe that way today. "If I go through the external rituals," they think, "if I belong to a church, recite the creed, sing the hymns, then God will be satisfied." That is the thinking of the flesh.

But God says that when you act on that basis, your autonomy is lost. You no longer have authority in your own kingdom. You become the slave of an inexorable force that will grind you under its heel and bring you into subjection. This is what every man or woman who lives by the flesh ultimately discovers (see Rom. 6:16).

After Saul builds an altar in his own self-will, God brings him to his knees and gives him one last chance to live by faith instead of by the flesh. At the beginning of 1 Samuel 15, we read:

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel;

so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.' "

This was Saul's last chance, because if Saul obeyed this command, he would demonstrate that he was ready to allow the Spirit to do His work against the flesh. In New Testament terms, God was giving Saul a chance to allow God to crucify the flesh and put it to death. The Amalekites are a picture throughout Scripture of the principle of the flesh that opposes the things of God.



Painting depicting defeat of Agag, king of the Amalekites

They were a foreign tribe about whom Moses said to Israel, “The L will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Ex. 17:16). God gave Saul this opportunity to carry out His will and obliterate the Amalekites, but what did Saul choose to do?

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed (15:7-9).

Note that line: “everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.” Despised and weak in whose eyes? I wonder if it wasn't the donkeys that Saul wanted to save. After all, he appreciated farm animals. He probably reasoned, “Why should we destroy these perfectly good animals?” He presumed to find something good in what God had already condemned as useless.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote that we must put off the old nature with its ways of jealousy, perverseness, bitterness, envy, anger, intemperance, selfishness, and the like (Col. 3:9). The mind of the spirit makes no compromise with such things. But the mind of the flesh rationalizes, “Oh, some of this is worth keeping. I can hardly be a real personality if I don't have a hot temper and tell people off once in a while.” So we presume to find good in what God has declared bad.

So Samuel came to Saul, and Saul

told him, “I have carried out the LORD’s instructions” (15:13).

But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear” (v. 14)?

Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest” (1 Sam. 15:15). That is a common excuse, isn’t it? We keep something for ourselves, and we pretend to dedicate it to God! The exchange between Samuel and Saul is very instructive for us today:

[Samuel said], “Why did you not obey the LORD?” . . .

“But I did obey the LORD,” Saul said. . .

Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king” (15:19–23).

No one can walk in authority and freedom as God intended while rejecting the authority of God’s Spirit. That is the lesson of the tragic story of Saul—the man of the flesh.

David, Israel’s Second King—The Man of Faith

The story of David, starting in chapter 16, is the story of a man after God’s own heart. We can reap tremendous lessons from the account of David, his rejection, and his exile. He was chosen from the eight sons of

Jesse. The seven eldest sons passed before Samuel and each one looked—from a human perspective—like a king in the making. But each time, God said through Samuel, “The LORD has not chosen this one.”

At last came the youngest and the skinniest one of all: David. God put His seal upon him. God’s choice was not according to outward appearance, but instead He looked at David’s heart.

Unlike Saul, David was not set on the throne immediately, but was tested and proved by struggle and adversity. This is the principle God often follows with those who learn to walk by faith. They are put through a time of obscurity and testing. Everything seems to go against them until at last they recognize the great principle by which God’s activity is always carried on: Human beings can do nothing in their own strength but only in complete dependence upon the power of the indwelling God.

This is the lesson David learned even as a shepherd boy, so that he could say, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul” (Ps. 23:1–3).

The most famous of David’s various tests was his confrontation with the Philistine giant Goliath. Israel was held in the grip of fear as Goliath paraded up and down in the no-man’s land between the armies. He taunted the Israelites, but no one dared to face him.

When little David came from his flocks to bring food to his brothers, he found the camp of Israel plunged in gloom and despair. He asked, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living

God?” (1 Sam. 17:26). That is always the outlook of faith. Those who trust in God are never shaken by circumstances.

Saul receives word about this young man in their midst and asks David what he wants to do. David says, “Your servant will go and fight him.” Saul, to be helpful, puts his armor on David. Now Saul was about one and a half feet taller than David, and the armor on the young lad only weighed him down. David couldn’t even take a step. Finally he said, “I cannot go in these . . . because I am not used to them.” David then went down to the brook and got five smooth stones. Why five? A little later, in 2 Samuel, you will read that Goliath had four brothers. David took five stones because he was prepared to take on the whole family!

David went out with his sling in his hand, let fly, and Goliath fell to the ground with a stone lodged between his eyes. Then David took Goliath’s own sword and cut off his head. This scene reminds us of Hebrews 2:14, which tells us that by His own death the Lord Jesus slew him who had the power of death, the Devil. So David symbolizes Christ—and the believer who allows Jesus Christ to live His life through him or her.

This event is followed by Saul’s jealousy of David. From chapter 18 on we have the story of Saul’s growing persecution of David—an illustration of the principle that Paul declares in Galatians: “At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now” (Gal. 4:29).

So Saul persecuted David and tried to kill him, so David went into exile. It was during this time that David wrote so many of the

psalms, those wonderful songs that speak of God’s faithfulness in the midst of distressing and depressing conditions.

In chapters 21 and 22, we find God’s abundant provision for David even in his exile. God provides David with the holy bread of the tabernacle to sustain him. This bread represented the presence of God and symbolized God’s deliverance for everyone who looks to Him while undergoing intense stress. To all such people, God gives the hidden bread, the bread from the very table of the Lord Himself. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” (John 6:35), and, “I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me” (John 6:57).

In his exile, David the king had a prophet, Gad, and a priest, Abiathar. The resources of these men of God were available to David even though he was hunted like a wild animal. Even greater resources are available to us in our own times of trouble, because we have available to us all the resources of the Lord Jesus Christ (our Prophet, our Priest, and our King).

Twice during this exile period David had the opportunity to kill Saul—and twice David spared Saul. In a remarkable spirit of faith, David waited for God to work out his problems.

The end of 1 Samuel brings us to the end of the man of the flesh—Saul. Out of a sense of desperation, Saul begins to mentally and spiritually crumble. He descends into witchcraft in an effort to determine the mind of the Lord after the Spirit of God had departed from him. Though witchcraft was forbidden by God, Saul visited the witch of Endor and tried to get her to summon the spirit of Samuel.

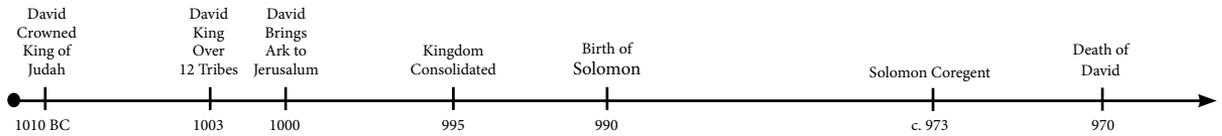
The witch probably intended to fool Saul with some sort of fraudulent “manifestation.” But God overruled the witch’s plans and instead of sending an impersonating spirit, as the witch expected, He sent the actual spirit of the prophet Samuel. The spirit of Samuel predicted Saul’s doom on the field of battle the next day.

True to the prophecy, Saul and his son Jonathan, David’s bosom friend, were slain. Saul’s death illustrates Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3 concerning the works of the fleshly or carnal believer—the Christian who

relies on the flesh rather than faith in the Spirit of God. Paul wrote: “If it [*a man’s work*] is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:15).

So Saul passes out of history and into eternity—a man whose earthly life and opportunities for serving God are largely wasted. It is an instructive tragedy for us all.

But there are more tales of both glory and tragedy ahead of us. The story of King David continues in the second book of Samuel.

The Story of David

A magazine reporter once visited a wealthy rancher. “I’d like to do a magazine story on your career as a sheep rancher,” said the reporter. “I’ve heard that yours is a true rags-to-riches tale, and I’d like to share the secret of your success with my readers.”

“Fine,” said the rancher. “I’m happy to tell you all about it.”

“Well, I understand you own several hundred thousand sheep. Your ranch covers half the county and your net worth is in the millions. Yet I hear that, twenty years ago, you started out with only one sheep.”

“Not only that,” said the rancher, “but in those days, my wife and I didn’t have a roof over our heads or a dollar to our name. So we sheared that one sheep, sold the wool, and used the money to buy another sheep.”

“Then what happened?”

“The next spring, one of our sheep gave birth to two lambs. Then we had four sheep. We sheared them, sold the wool, and used the money to buy two more sheep. That gave us a total of six sheep.”

“Then what?”

“The next spring, we had six more lambs—so now we had twelve sheep to

shear. We sold the wool and bought more sheep.”

“So now we’re getting down to it—the secret of your success!”

“That’s right,” drawled the rancher. “The next year—”

“I know! I know!” the reporter interrupted. “You sold more wool and bought more sheep!”

“Nope,” said the rancher. “That was the year my father-in-law died and left us fifty million dollars.”

King David got his start in much the same way. He began with a few sheep—and suddenly, unexpectedly, God exalted him and made him the king over Israel, a man of extraordinary wealth and power. If the story of David were made into a TV miniseries, the episode covering 1 Samuel 16 to 31 might be called “King David: The Early Years.” Now, in 2 Samuel, we come to the episode we might call “King David: The Agony and the Ecstasy.”

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the story of King David in the book of 2 Samuel, and uncovers the lessons to be learned from the king who sinned greatly, repented in tears, yet remained “a man after God’s own heart.”

LEFT: Modern day Gilgal

Outline of 2 Samuel

The book of 2 Samuel falls into four simple divisions:

(1) Chapters 1 through 5 trace the road to dominion. David begins his reign as king over the tribe of Judah. Seven years later, he is crowned king over Israel's twelve tribes.

(2) Chapters 6 through 10 highlight worship and victory. These two elements always go together in God's economy and in the Christian life.

(3) Chapters 11 through 20 record David's failure and God's forgiveness.

(4) Chapters 21 through 24 close the book with an appendix setting forth some of the important lessons King David learned in the course of his reign.

The Road to Dominion

There are two ways to look at the life of David.

You may look at him as a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ—not only as the forerunner and genetic ancestor of Jesus, but also as a reflection of Jesus Christ in His millennial reign at the end of history. David was rejected and persecuted, as was Christ. During David's exile, he gathered around him men who became his leaders and generals when he became king. Thus David is a picture of Christ who also was rejected, forsaken by the world, and who secretly gathered his inner circle of leaders for the day when He would come to establish His kingdom and reign over the earth.

But David is not only a picture of Christ. He is also a picture of each individual believer, of you and me. When we read the story of David from this point of view, the lessons of

David's life come alive for us. If you look at these Old Testament books as mirrors, you will always find yourself there.

David's story symbolizes what happens in a Christian's life when he gives everything over to God. Every Christian is offered a kingdom, just as David was offered a kingdom. The kingdom is the kingdom of one's life, and it is much like the kingdom of Israel; enemies threaten it externally while temptation and folly threaten to undermine it from within. As we see how God established David as ruler over his kingdom, we will see how the Holy Spirit works in our lives to enable us to reign with Christ Jesus.

The first section opens with the death of Saul, a man of the flesh. David learns about the death of Saul and his son Jonathan from a passing Amalekite who boasts that he slew King Saul, took the crown off his head, and brought it to David (1:10). An Amalekite is a descendant of Jacob's brother Esau; as Moses prophesied, "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16).

We can regard this Amalekite's tale as a lying boast, because it differs considerably from the account of Saul's death in 1 Samuel. This man undoubtedly found the dead body of the king, plundered it, and attempted to use that plunder for his own advancement. One lesson of this story is how the flesh (symbolized by the Amalekite) can steal away our crowns and seek to glorify itself. David however honors Saul as the Lord's anointed and kills the Amalekite.

In a song of great beauty and power, David lauds Saul and Jonathan as men used by God, despite their weaknesses. The song closes

with an eloquent expression of David's deep loss at the death of his dear friend Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:26).

With Saul dead, David is free to be king. This symbolizes for us the time when we come at last to the full truth of the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ puts the old man to death and brings an end to the reign of the flesh, as symbolized by Saul. When it finally breaks upon our astonished intellect that God truly seeks to crucify the life of Adam in us and raise us with Christ, we stand alongside David: Our "inner Saul" is dead. We are free to reign over our own lives.

At first David was king over his own tribe, Judah. For seven years he lived and ruled in the city of Hebron. But while he was king over Judah, a fierce struggle raged between the house of David and the house of Saul. The old flesh dies hard. It doesn't give up easily.

Finally, in chapter 5, we read that David comes to the place where he is acknowledged king over all twelve tribes. He is free now to assume his God-given royal prerogatives over the entire land. It is a long and difficult road, but David finally arrives at the place of dominion.

Worship and Victory

Chapter 6 begins the second division of this book. Here David assumes full authority within the kingdom. As king over all twelve tribes, David's first concern is to bring the ark of God back to the center of Israel's national life. He wants the presence of God and the holiness of God to have first place in the life of the nation. King David's realization parallels the realization a committed Christian comes

to upon recognizing that Jesus has the right to be Lord over every area of life.

For twenty years, the ark has been preserved in the hilltop house of Abinadab in the town of Kiriath Jearim, about seven miles west of Jerusalem (see 1 Sam. 6:21–7:2). Here, at the beginning of 2 Samuel 6, David builds a brand new oxcart and sets the ark in the middle of it. Then he starts back with all the people rejoicing around the ark.

But then a terrible thing happens. The oxen stumble in the road, and the oxcart shakes. A man named Uzzah, walking alongside the cart, reaches out to steady the ark. The moment his hand touches the ark, the power of God strikes the man and he falls dead.

This tragedy casts a pall over the entire procession. Even David is afraid of God because of this sudden, frightening judgment against Uzzah. Why did Uzzah die? His intentions were good. He wanted to keep the ark from falling to the ground—but he had ignored God's instructions on how the ark was to be moved.

David was so sick at heart that he stopped the procession and placed the ark of God in the first house that was handy. Then he went back to Jerusalem, feeling bitter and resentful toward the Lord. This was the first lesson David had to learn as king.

In fact, it was David's fault that Uzzah had died. God had already instructed Israel through the law of Moses that only the Kohathites of the tribe of Levi were to be in charge of the ark, and they were to carry the ark on poles on their shoulders (see Deut. 10:8; Num. 7:9). The ark was not to be carried by cart or pack animal. Even those who were

in charge of the ark were forbidden to touch it (see Num. 4:15). David was so presumptuous that he assumed that God would let him ignore the law of Moses. He simply loaded the ark on an oxcart and began to move it along the road—and an innocent man died.

David had to learn that God must be served God's way, not our way. Our good intentions are never enough if we are to accomplish God's will. We must act in obedience to His commands.

I once talked with a young man who, like David, experienced a time of deep resentment toward God. He was convinced that God had called him to carry out a certain plan. He even announced to his friends what God was about to accomplish through him. But everything fell apart—and the young man was bewildered.

"I can't help feeling God is unfair," he told me. "He doesn't back up what He promises."

As we talked, it became clear that he had made some of the same errors David had made. He was presumptuous about God's will and tried to carry out God's will in his own way, rather than the way God set forth in His Word. If we want to serve God, we must sign on to His agenda and use His methods—not simply expect Him to endorse our plans. David had to learn this truth, and the death of Uzzah stands as a vivid testimony that God will never compromise His commands.

Next we read about David's desire to build a temple for God. David said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent" (7:2). Nathan encouraged David to go ahead with his plan.

But then God sent a message to Nathan to

say that David should not proceed because he was a man of war. Only Jesus Christ, or in Old Testament terms, someone who symbolizes Christ as the Prince of Peace, will build the temple of God among humanity.

God had chosen David to symbolically represent Jesus as the conquering king over all. But God rejected David's plan to build the temple, even though David was well-intentioned and sincere. From David's response, it seems that he learned the lesson of the death of Uzzah. David praises God and graciously accepts this disappointment. He agrees that God is right and that the temple should be built by Solomon, his son.

The rest of this section reports David's victories over Israel's enemies, the Philistines and the Ammonites. When God is in the center of David's life, when the king of Israel subjects himself to the King of the universe and His eternal program, nothing can hinder victory. All internal and external enemies are in complete subjection to the one who walks in a humble, obedient relationship with God.

Failure and Forgiveness

The next major section tells the story of David's failure and sin. Chapter 11 begins: "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war . . ." (11:1).

In some ways, wars in ancient times were conducted in a more civilized way than at other times in history. Kings waited for good weather before sending their men out to fight. It was the spring of the year, and the Lord's agenda called for wars to be fought against the evil, idolatrous nations. It was the season for kings to go forth to battle.

So where do we find King David? The

text goes on to tell us: “David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem” (11:1).

Now we see where the failure begins. David had forsaken his post. He was AWOL—absent without leave—from the Lord’s service. Whenever we are not doing what God has called us to do, we expose ourselves to temptation. What happens next can be told in three simple statements: David saw. He inquired. He took.

Walking on the roof of his house *he saw* a beautiful woman taking a bath. He sent a messenger and *he inquired* about her. And then *he took* her.

That is how temptation progresses. It follows the same pattern in your life and mine. Temptation starts first with simple desire. There is nothing wrong with the desire. It is awakened in us simply because we are human, but it must be dealt with when it arises. Either we put temptation away from us completely—or it becomes an intent to sin.

David saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba. He desired her, and began to plan a way to take her for himself. He sent and inquired about her and the sinful act of taking her followed immediately. Thus did David—the man after God’s own heart, the man of the spirit—become involved in the deep, treacherous sin of the flesh.

After he had taken the woman sexually, he refused to face the truth of his sin. Instead of openly confessing his sin and repenting of it, he committed another sin to cover it up. This, as we all know from sad experience,

begins a descending spiral of progressive sin and cover-up.

David’s sin of adultery resulted in Bathsheba becoming pregnant. This was a major problem since Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, had been out on the battlefield (where David should have been!). It would be obvious that Uriah was not the baby’s father. So David sent for Uriah and tried to trick him into having sexual relations with Bathsheba. But Uriah, in his simple faithfulness to God and to his king, refused to spend the night with his own wife. David’s plan failed.

Finally, David arranged for Uriah to be double-crossed on the battlefield. David had his own soldiers withdraw from Uriah in battle, leaving him to be killed by the enemy. It was one of the most callous and dishonorable acts one human being ever perpetrated on another—and we can hardly comprehend how low this man of God had sunk. In the attempt to cover up his sin, David corrupted one of his generals, making Joab a co-conspirator in the plot against Uriah. Though it was an Ammonite sword that killed Uriah, it was as if David himself had plunged it into Uriah’s heart.

God’s verdict on David’s act is recorded in 2 Samuel 11:27: “The thing David had done displeased the LORD.” David was an adulterer and a murderer.

So God sent Nathan the prophet to David. Nathan approached the king very carefully, using the same teaching method Jesus would later use so effectively: a parable. Nathan told David the story of a rich man who had many flocks of sheep and had taken away a poor man’s ewe lamb.

Hearing the story, David became angry and said, “The man who did this deserves to die!” (12:1–5).

Nathan had him! “You are the man!” the prophet said accusingly.

Immediately, David recognized the point of this story and acknowledged his sin. He no longer tried to justify it or hide it. In fact, David wrote Psalm 51 during this time—the psalm of confession and repentance. This should be our psalm whenever we are burdened by guilt and remorse.

David’s Restoration

God’s grace and forgiveness are so great that He will even restore a person who has committed sins as great as David’s. But even though His forgiveness is all-encompassing, sin has natural consequences—and those consequences cannot be avoided. David must face these consequences as the prophet Nathan says to him:

“The sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.”

This is what the LORD says, “Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight” (12:10–11).

This prophecy was later fulfilled by Absalom, David’s son. Nathan goes on:

[God says] “You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.”

Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of

PSALM 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. 6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. 15 Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 My sacrifice, O God, is [b] a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. 18 May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

the LORD show utter contempt the son born to you will die” (12:12–14).

The law demands the death penalty for this sin—but God in His grace forgives David after his confession. The king’s life is spared, and God restores a personal relationship between Himself and David.

But God deals with us not only according to His grace, but according to His government. The government of God demands that our deeds, which affect others, carry consequences, even when forgiveness has taken place. So David faces the result of his deeds and, as we learn in the New Testament, God chastens those whom He loves (Rev. 3:19).

The baby born of this illegitimate union dies, despite David’s pleadings and tears as recorded in Psalm 51.

Moreover, there is trouble coming into David’s family and his kingdom. The New Testament tells us, “Do not be deceived”—that is, don’t kid yourself—“God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction” (Gal. 6:7–8). Because of his sin, David will never again know peace in his house.

In chapters 13 to 20, we see how this prophecy works itself out in David’s life. Chapter 13 tells the story of Amnon, David’s son, as he sins against his own sister, Tamar. This sin produces hatred in Absalom, David’s other son, against Amnon. So lust, bitterness, and murder spring up within David’s own family—and King David is helpless to prevent it. David lacks the moral authority to rebuke Amnon, because

Amnon is following in his father’s footsteps, committing sins of passion for which David himself had set the example.

In chapter 15, we read of the treachery and rebellion of Absalom. This handsome, gifted son of David steals the allegiance of the nation away from King David, drawing men into a conspiracy to seize the throne. Absalom is so successful that David must flee into exile. Imagine that—the man God set over Israel as king must now flee like a common criminal—and this is just one consequence of his sin with Bathsheba. David saw. He inquired. He took. And for years afterward, he paid the price.

Throughout his troubles, David’s heart is humble, penitent, and trusting. David never complains or blames God. He recognizes that God can still work out the details of his life. Eventually, God restores David to the throne and Absalom is overtaken, conquered by his own vanity. His long hair, the source of his pride, gets caught in the branches of a tree and Joab, David’s ruthless general (who also carried out David’s order against Uriah), finds Absalom and kills him.

With Absalom’s death, the rebellion is crushed. But that’s not the whole story. In chapter 20, we find the ultimate result of David’s sin in the rebellion of Sheba, the son of Bicri, against King David. All the trouble in David’s life stems from his moral failure, years earlier. There is no peace throughout the rest of his reign. He has God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, God’s restoration, and God’s blessing, but he continues to reap the result of his own folly. The king’s sorrow is a lesson to us all.

Lessons Learned by King David

In chapters 21 through 24, we come to the epilogue or appendix of this book. Here we find some of the lessons that King David learned throughout his forty-year reign. In chapter 21 we read the story of the Gibeonites, who teach us that the past must be dealt with. If we have past sins that can still be corrected, we must go back and set them straight. Many a Christian discovers that a lie told or an item stolen in the old life now weighs heavily upon a Spirit-led conscience. So make amends, pay the debt, set the wrong thing right.

In the story of the Gibeonites, David went back and corrected something that happened under King Saul. As Saul's heir to the throne, he had the responsibility. Second Samuel 22:26–27 reproduces the text of Psalm 18, in which David sings: “To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd.”

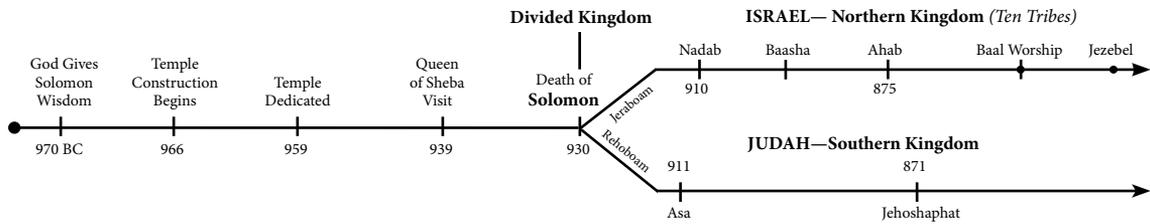
David says that God will be to you what you are to Him. If you are open and honest with Him, God will be open and honest with you. If you are crooked and deceitful toward God, He will cause all your circumstances to

deceive you and lie to you. If you are pure in heart, you will discover that God brings more of His beauty, purity, and perfection into your own heart and soul.

This is what Paul cries out for in Philippians when he says, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12).

The last chapter of the book contains the account of David's final moral failure—the sin of numbering Israel. A plague came upon the people of Israel when David, in his pride, began to rely on his own resources and his military might, instead of relying upon the power of God. This story teaches us that our old nature is always there, ready to spring into action the moment we cease to rely on the Spirit of God.

Sin never dies of old age. No matter how long you walk with God, it is still possible to fall. The only thing that maintains the spiritual life is the quiet, day-by-day, moment-by-moment walk of faith. It's fitting, then, that 2 Samuel closes with the man after God's own heart repenting of his sin and turning back to the worship of the living God.

How to Lose a Kingdom

First Kings is the gripping story of how to lose a kingdom. Like so many Old Testament books, this book is a dramatic and powerful visual aid by which God illustrates many important principles about how we, as Christians, should live. We can see our own lives, struggles, and needs reflected in the stories of this book.

The book of 1 Kings holds the secret of success in reigning over the kingdom of your life. It's the secret of learning to be submissive to God's authority. In other words, you can never exercise dominion over your life unless you first subject yourself to the dominion of God. When you do, He gives you greater freedom and responsibility. If you reject His rule over your life, then you cannot rule your own life, and you cannot fulfill the enormous potential God has planned for you.

Those who insist on running their own lives their own way inevitably end up handing control of their lives over to other forces: to lusts and desires, to appetites and cravings, to other people, to worldly values and worldly pressures. Only by submitting our self-will to God's will can we truly be free!

LEFT: Arnon Gorge

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of 1 and 2 Kings are combined into one book of Kings. They are aptly named Kings, for they trace the royal dynasties of Israel and Judah. Throughout these books, the spotlight is always on the king; as the king goes, so goes the nation. When the king walks humbly with God, He blesses the kingdom.

There were no such blessings for the northern kingdom because it had no godly kings. But in Judah, in the house of David, there was victory and prosperity when godly kings had dominion. The rains came, the crops grew, the economy flourished, enemies were vanquished, and there was peace in the land. When the king walked with God, there was victory and prosperity. But when the king disobeyed, there was famine, drought, war, and suffering.

Good kings are always symbolic types of Christ, and the list of good, godly kings includes David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Joash, and Jehoshaphat. In the lives of these kings

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the tragedy of the kings of Israel, extracting powerful life lessons for how we, as Christians, should "rule" wisely over the "kingdom" of our lives.

(despite their human failings), we see symbols of the kingly reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. The disobedient kings were types of the Antichrist, the man of sin, the personification of evil who is yet to appear upon the earth.

The Age of Solomon Begins

As the book opens, we see that God has called Israel out from among all the nations of the earth and marked them as His own special people. He has made this little plot of land an international stage and He will focus the attention of the world on this small but special collection of people.

In chapter 1, we find King David upon the throne. His son, Solomon, is in line to succeed him as king. But one of David's other sons, Adonijah, has different ideas. He is plotting rebellion in order to gain control of the throne even before his father dies. David, learning of this, acts to immediately place Solomon on the throne. So Solomon is anointed king while his father still lives.

This symbolically suggests what the reigning authority in our lives should be. True authority comes as a gift from the hand of God. We cannot reign except as we are established by God. When we give ourselves to the authority of God, He brings every circumstance, every rebel, and every enemy under His control so that they cannot threaten our reign.

In chapters 2 and 3, Solomon ascends to the throne and rules in power and glory. Solomon's reign marks the greatest extension of the kingdom of Israel. His dominion is characterized by a display of outward majesty and power. But in chapter 3 we also find the seeds of defeat. These are crucial to notice:

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem. The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places (3:1-3).

Solomon loved God with all his heart and began his reign with a wonderful expression of yieldedness and desire for God's authority over his life. He followed in the footsteps of his father, David. Nevertheless, he did two little things—seemingly trivial matters—that plant the seeds for the ultimate overthrow of his kingdom.

First, he made an alliance with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Throughout Scripture, Egypt is generally presented as a symbolic picture of the world. Solomon not only makes a political alliance with Egypt, but he makes a personal alliance as well: he marries Pharaoh's daughter and brings her into the heart of the nation of Israel. Thus Israel, through King Solomon, makes an alliance with the world.

Second, Solomon worshiped at the high places. He followed all the statutes of his father David, the passage tells us—*except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places*. In the pagan religions of that day, all worship was conducted on the mountaintops. The pagan tribes had erected altars, many of which were the center of idolatrous and obscene worship. Frequently, the mountaintop altar was where the fertility

rites of sex gods were carried out. Because Israel had no temple, these pagan altars had been taken over by the people of Israel and were used for sacrifices to Jehovah.

Though David had placed the ark of God in the tabernacle in Jerusalem, Solomon did not present his offerings there, but instead made his offering at the high places. Though Solomon sacrificed to the God he loved, he burned those sacrifices on pagan altars.

Outwardly, young King Solomon's rule was admirable and his heart was honorable. Nevertheless, there was one area of his life that was not fully committed to God. His fellowship with God was weakened by his alliance with the world. He didn't understand that the secret of experiencing God's blessings lay in an inner yieldedness to God's will, represented by worship in strict accordance with His Word. Solomon should have worshiped God before the ark of the covenant. Solomon's lack of adherence to the Levitical rules regarding worship was the first indication that something was wrong in his life.

Solomon's One Request

Also in chapter 3, we have the account of Solomon's dream, in which God appears and tells him to ask for whatever he wants. In response, Solomon asks not for riches or honor but for wisdom: "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (v. 9).

By beginning his reign in this way, Solomon showed that he understood the most essential ingredient in effective

leadership: wisdom. Solomon's great wisdom is demonstrated in 1 Kings 3:16–28, when he settles a dispute between two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby. The two women were prostitutes living in the same house, and both had given birth at about the same time, but one baby had died. Each woman claimed the living baby as her own. So the two women took the matter to court and asked King Solomon to judge whose baby it was.

In a dramatic display of God-given wisdom, Solomon said, "Bring me a sword." Then, laying the baby down before these two women, he said, "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other." One woman said, "Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!" But the other woman—the real mother—immediately protested, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don't kill him!"

Solomon flushed out the imposter—and spotlighted the real mother. This was a powerful demonstration of Solomon's wisdom—and a challenge to today's judges who decide divorce cases, custody cases, and adoption cases by emotionally cutting children in half rather than placing them with people who truly love them. Today's judges desperately need the God-given wisdom of Solomon.

In 1 Kings 4, we find a commentary on Solomon's great wisdom [my own commentary appears in brackets]:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and

greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol [these were the media pundits of that day]. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs [we have them recorded in the book of Proverbs] and his songs numbered a thousand and five [we only have one of those—Song of Songs]. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom (4:29–34).

Here we have a picture of the kind of intellect Paul describes: “We have the mind of Christ,” and “The spiritual man makes judgments about all things” (1 Cor. 2:15–16). Solomon did not need anyone to teach him, since he already discerned all things. He was able to analyze and understand the workings of the world and the human heart, because he had the wisdom that comes from God.

Why was Solomon so wise? Because wisdom was the one and only request he asked of God, and God granted it to him. As James 1:5 tells us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

But Solomon’s request contained one slight weakness. He asked for wisdom that he might govern the people. We can only wish that he had also asked for wisdom to govern his own life. That is where he so often failed. God granted Solomon the wisdom of governance, but He also allowed

circumstances in Solomon’s personal life that put his wisdom to the test. Along with wisdom, God gave Solomon riches and honor, which eventually proved to be his undoing. As he gloried and exulted in the magnificence of his kingdom, pride began to enter his heart; and as Solomon himself observed in his earlier, wiser days, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

The Glory of Solomon’s Kingdom

The wisdom of Solomon produces a well-ordered, peaceful, prosperous kingdom, as chapter 4 tells us. In verses 1 through 19, we see that Solomon is a master at delegating, appointing eleven princes and twelve governors over the kingdom. By dividing the governance of the kingdom in this way, Solomon ensures that the various levels of government will function effectively and efficiently. The most responsive government is the one that is closest to the people.

Solomon wisely understands that God is not the author of confusion. The Lord of creation does all things decently and in order. So Solomon patterns his governance after the orderly governance of God. As a result, the people of Israel prosper and are happy under the firm but wise leadership of Solomon, as we read:

The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River [Euphrates] to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon’s subjects all his life (4:20 – 21).

Here is a picture of Solomon's godly authority over the dominion God had given him. This is the kind of firm control God wants all of us to exercise over our own lives.

In chapters 5 through 8, we find the account of the glorious temple Solomon built. For four hundred years, Israel had worshiped in the tabernacle—a mere tent! But Solomon fulfilled the dream of his father David, the dream of a permanent and splendid place in which the people of Israel could worship their God.

The description of the temple in these chapters conveys a splendor beyond imagining. It was built of great hand-quarried stones and imported cedar. The interior was covered with gold. In today's dollars, the structure would have cost billions of dollars. The true grandeur of the temple, however, was not the gold but the glory—the Shekinah glory of God that came down and dwelt in the Holy Place when Solomon dedicated the temple.

In chapter 10, we have the story, wonderful in its detail, of the visits of the queen of Sheba and the king of Tyre. They came to see with their own eyes the widely reported glories of Solomon's kingdom.

The Decline and Fall of Solomon

Then we come to chapter 11, where the story of Solomon takes a sudden turn for the worse. The seeds of decline and disobedience that were sown earlier in Solomon's life now begin to sprout:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You

must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray (11:1–3).

This is the same man who, in the book of Proverbs wrote, "He who finds a wife finds what is good" (Prov. 18:22). Apparently, Solomon didn't know when he had too much of a good thing! A thousand wives is nine hundred and ninety-nine too many.

Here we see the failure of Solomon as his heart is turned away from God. Where did Solomon's decline begin? It began with his enjoyment of the magnificence of his rule. The wealth and power of Solomon's reign were evidence of God's blessing on his life, but Solomon's downhill slide began when that which God had forbidden captured his heart. God had warned the Israelites against marrying women from the surrounding idol-worshipping cultures:

And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same (Ex. 34:16).

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you (Deut. 7:3–4).

Solomon presents a vivid picture of a principle stated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Where your treasure is, there your

heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). Solomon gave his heart to women from idolatrous cultures—and in time, those women turned his heart away from God.

I recall the story of a man who enjoyed a tremendous ministry in the pulpit and in many other ways. Suddenly, his ministry collapsed, brought down in shame by charges of immorality. It turned out that for many years there had been an unrighteous, unrepented, and unjudged affection in his heart. Outwardly, he was a minister for God; inwardly, sin ate away at this man’s heart and life. Finally, his ministry for God was destroyed. Tragically, this story is replayed again and again in the lives of Christians in all walks of life.

The first step in moral decline always begins with our desires and emotions. What has captured first place in your mind, your desires, and your emotions? If it is something that God has disallowed, then you have planted the seeds of destruction in your own life just as Solomon planted them in his life. We see the tragic result in the next few verses:

He followed Ashtoreth [the sex goddess] the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away (11:5–9).

Chemosh was the hideous image to which the pagan worshipers sacrificed their children in fire. Incredibly, Solomon himself built a place of worship for this grinning demonic god! As we read through the rest of this chapter, we see that three times in rapid succession, “the Lord raised up against Solomon an adversary.”

At the end of this chapter, Solomon “rested with his fathers” and was buried in the city of David—a sudden collapse of the glory and majesty of his kingdom. Even the glory of Solomon’s temple proves transitory. Though it would stand for four hundred years, it would be plundered and stripped of its gold and furnishings only five years after Solomon’s death.

A Kingdom Divided

Chapter 12 begins the second movement in this book: the breakup and decline of the nation of Israel. Disaster overtakes the kingdom as Solomon’s son Rehoboam takes the reigns of government. Jeroboam splits the kingdom, taking the ten tribes of Israel in the north to begin the northern kingdom of Israel, while Rehoboam is left to rule the remaining southern tribes in the south, which became known as Judah. During Jeroboam’s reign over Israel in the north he reintroduced the worship of golden calves—a sin God had judged during Israel’s trek in the desert (see Ex. 32).

Chapter 14 presents the story of Egypt’s invasion and defeat of Rehoboam and the southern kingdom of Judah—the very nation out of which God delivered Israel under Moses (14:25–26). Again, Egypt is a picture of the world and its ways—its wickedness,

its folly, and its futility. Most of the treasures Solomon amassed during the height of his reign were plundered and carried off.

The account tells of various kings who ascend to the throne of Israel—most of them evil, or incompetent, or both. Jeroboam is followed by Nadab, who is followed by Baasha and Zimri. Finally comes Ahab—probably the most evil king Israel ever knew—and his wicked wife Jezebel.

The concluding section of the book, beginning in chapter 17 with Elijah, introduces the prophetic ministry. While there were other prophets before Elijah, they did not perform miracles as Elijah did. The prophets who ministered to Judah, the southern kingdom, did no miracles because God's testimony there was still central to the life of the nation. But Israel, the northern kingdom, rejected God's presence and worshiped golden calves instead of Him. The ministry of miracles was a testimony to the people that God was still in their midst and He demanded their attention. God sought to shake them up so that they would see how far they had drifted from Him.

Elijah's ministry is a revelation of God's dealings with the wayward human heart. First, he asks God to shut the heavens so that it would not rain for three years. Then the prophet called down fire from heaven upon those who were sent to arrest him and bring him before the king. These miracles caught the attention of the people and produced at least a degree of repentance. God uses a harsh hand to bring about our repentance when we human beings force Him to do so.

In chapter 18, we come to the judgment against Baal as the two opposing religious

philosophies in Israel come to a climactic clash on Mount Carmel. Here Elijah challenges four hundred priests of Baal to a contest to determine which deity has the power to send down fire from heaven. In a remarkable scene, Elijah taunts the idolatrous priests as they slash their flesh and cry out to their god. " 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened' " (1 Kings 18:27).

When the pagan priests have exhausted themselves to no avail, Elijah rolls up his sleeves and goes to work. He repairs the altar of the Lord, which has fallen into disrepair. Then he orders four large jars of water to be poured over the bull and the wood upon the altar. He intends to make sure that the demonstration of God's power is not just spectacular but nothing less than astonishing. Then he calls upon God, and God sends down a fire so intense that it not only consumes the sacrifice but the water and the stones of the altar! Once judgment is exercised, the heavens open again and rain pours down upon the land.

This is a picture of what happens in the life of anyone who resists God's rightful rule. In what has been termed God's "severe mercy," He brings us under His chastening until our stubbornness is broken and we are humbled at last before Him. Then the rain of God's grace can pour once again upon our hearts, bringing good fruit and sweet blessing once more.

In 1 Kings 19 comes an account I have always found amusing: the story of Elijah's fear of Jezebel. This bold, courageous prophet of God has faced four hundred priests on the

mountaintop—yet he runs in terror from one angry woman! He is so defeated that, as he hides under a juniper bush, he begs God to take his life. But God deals with Elijah according to His grace.

The first thing God does is to put Elijah to bed under the juniper tree and give him a good night's rest. Then God gives him a good square meal, divinely provided by an angel of the Lord. Finally God takes Elijah out on a mountain, and Elijah witnesses all the unleashed fury of nature—an earthquake, a raging fire, and a booming thunderstorm. Through this experience, Elijah learns an amazing secret: Jehovah, the Lord God Almighty, is not always to be found in the overwhelming forces of nature. Sometimes His power is most dramatically demonstrated when He moves through the still, small voice of a changed conscience.

The story of 1 Kings is the story of a kingdom lost. Solomon, perhaps the wisest man who ever lived, fell into folly and disobedience and lost a kingdom. After his death, the kingdom was divided in two, and a succession of unwise and evil kings brought nothing but misery to the people. The book closes with the story of King Ahab and his self-centered desire for Naboth's vineyard, which ultimately brings God's judgment.

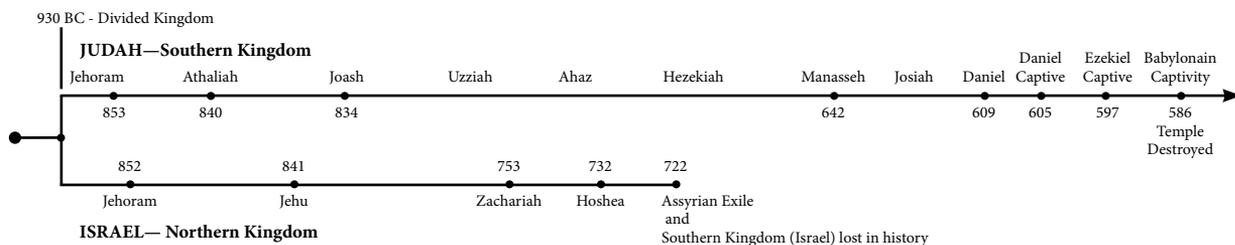
In chapter 22 we learn how God works through apparently accidental circumstances as the king of Israel and the king of Judah go out to battle. Ahab, king of Israel, in his

satanic cleverness, tries to put the king of Judah in the forefront of battle. But as Ahab compliments himself on his trickery, a stray arrow, randomly unleashed by a warrior on the opposite side, pierces a chink in his armor and penetrates his heart.

Our God is the Lord of all circumstances. His will is accomplished even through seeming accidents and coincidences. He is behind all the movements of our lives, and His perfect will is accomplished.

Outward circumstances will never dethrone you from ruling your life as God intended from the beginning. Nothing you encounter—pressures, mistreatment, obstacles, accidents—can ever succeed in dethroning you. You can be enslaved by the flesh and the devil if you allow it, if you permit some rival form of worship to enter into your heart, leaving no room for God. That rival form of worship may be a habit, an obsession with status and money, a sinful desire or forbidden affection, or an attitude of rebellion.

If you, like Solomon, allow folly to replace godly wisdom in your life, then your kingdom's days are numbered. But if you make God and His kingdom the sole desire of your heart, then you will reign forever, and the kingdom of your life will be secure.

A Wasted Life

A pastor once told his congregation to go home and read the book of Hezekiah in preparation for next week's sermon. The following Sunday, he stepped into the pulpit and asked how many in the congregation had done the assigned reading. Several people raised their hands.

If you are familiar with the books of the Bible, you know why this story is funny: There is no book of Hezekiah! But we will meet good King Hezekiah here in the book of 2 Kings.

The first half of 1 Kings was dominated by the story of King Solomon. In the second half of 1 Kings, a new and towering figure emerges—not a king but a prophet, Elijah. The story of Elijah continues in 2 Kings, as God repeatedly intervenes in the lives of Israel's kings in an attempt to reverse the trend of corruption and decay. In addition to Elijah, God also raises up the prophet Elisha. The book of 2 Kings is noteworthy primarily because of the ministries of these two mighty men of God.

God never spoke to the nation through a king. The king's role was to govern and administer justice. The life

and character of the kingdom was a reflection of the life and character of the king.

But when God wanted to speak to the nation and call the nation back to its founding principles, He sent a prophet. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God sends other prophets to Israel—men such as Hosea, Amos, Joel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. But the prophets who take center stage in 1 and 2 Kings are Elijah and Elisha.

The Prophet Elijah: Thunderings of the Law

Elijah was a rugged outdoorsman who wore haircloth bound by a leather girdle. He was a scraggly, mangy-looking character who repeatedly risked his life to confront the king face-to-face. He was bold and faithful, and God protected him. We have already seen in 1 Kings 18 how he challenged the four

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter looks at the decline of Israelite society under a series of evil kings, and the ministries of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who were sent by God to wake the nation out of its deadly sleep. In this chapter, we find lessons for victorious Christian living by learning from the tragic record of Israel's decline and fall.



Mount Carmel

hundred priests of Baal at Mount Carmel and single-handedly defied the power of their abominable false god.

The ministry of Elijah—this bold, cantankerous prophet of the law—was to bring the thunderings of the law to Israel, to awaken the nation to its shameful condition. His was a ministry of mingled love, fire, and judgment.

At the close of his ministry, Elijah was triumphantly and miraculously caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire as described in chapter 2. When faithful Elisha refused to leave his mentor Elijah, the mantle of the prophet literally fell upon Elisha and he was promised a double portion of the prophetic spirit of Elijah.

The Prophet Elisha: Grace and Glory

In contrast to Elijah, Elisha's ministry is a ministry of grace, sweetness, and glory throughout Israel. Why was this? If you study the narrative carefully, comparing it with the narrative of the four gospels, you will see that Elijah and Elisha symbolize the double-edged ministry of Jesus Christ, who (as John 1:14 tells us) "came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Elisha represents the sweet grace of Jesus; Elijah represents His thundering truth.

When the Lord Jesus came to Israel, He found the nation in a state of decay and corruption, just as it was when Elijah came. Herod was on the throne as a vassal of Rome. The high priest's office was in the hands of the Sadducees—the rationalists of that day. They had turned the temple into a place of corruption and commerce.

The Lord Jesus' ministry to official Israel was in the power of Elijah. He began His ministry with a prophetic act: the cleansing of the temple. He made a whip of many cords, and with a voice of thunder and eyes of fire, He drove the money changers out of the temple, turning over tables and flinging the merchandise into the courtyard.

But our Lord's ministry to the individual was the ministry of Elisha—the ministry of grace and of tender compassion and forgiveness.

There's another interesting comparison here: Elisha also seems to symbolize the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church after the day of Pentecost. Elisha's ministry begins when Elijah bodily ascends into heaven, just as the Spirit's ministry begins when Jesus ascends into heaven. Elisha's first miracle depicts the ministry of the Holy Spirit: putting salt into the water, causing it to turn sweet. The miracle of the oil that kept

flowing continually is another symbol of the Holy Spirit, as is the miracle of the water that suddenly appears in the parched and barren land. There is also the miracle of resurrection when Elisha raises a dead boy to life by laying his staff upon him and breathing on his face. This was not mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but a genuine resurrection.

When everything looks dead and hopeless, the Spirit (as symbolized by Elisha) conquers death and produces life.

The Decline and Fall of the Kingdoms

The book of 2 Kings traces the continuing decline of these two kingdoms. Israel, the northern kingdom, is the first to fall. In chapter 17, while under the reign of King Hoshea, Israel is conquered by Assyria's King Shalmaneser and carried away into slavery and captivity:

The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do," and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah

pole [that is, a sex god]. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left (17:13–18).

Here is a shocking picture of human evil, and the consequences of human sin. Here we see evil infecting the life of a nation that was once dedicated to God. We also discover that evil has an enormous power to infect and enslave people, even those who once dedicated themselves to God. Even the smallest sins and moral compromises may lead to greater sin and rebellion against God.

Judah's decline and fall was delayed for a while because of a godly king named Hezekiah, who arose during this time of national darkness and led his country for a while into the light. Amazingly, Hezekiah's father had been an ungodly king, and in time, Hezekiah's own son would also become an ungodly king. But Hezekiah himself was a gift of God's grace to the southern kingdom of Judah.

When Hezekiah comes to the throne in chapter 18, his first official act is to cleanse the temple. It took the Levite priests sixteen days just to remove all the rubbish and filth out of the temple before they could even begin purifying it for service. That's how corrupt the nation had become.

Next, Hezekiah reintroduced the Passover. He destroyed the brass serpent the people worshiped. This was the very serpent God had used for their blessing when Moses lifted

it up in the wilderness (see Num. 21:8–9), but God never intended it to become an object of worship. It was merely a symbol of the saving work of Christ, which still lay ahead in history. Hezekiah understood that there was nothing intrinsically sacred about the brass serpent, so he destroyed it to make sure it would never again be used for idolatrous worship.

Here's an important lesson for us all: Anything, even a God-given blessing in our lives, can become a source of idolatry if we put our trust in it. That includes money, a career, a religious leader, or a church. Instead of trusting in our blessings, we must trust solely in the One from whom all blessings flow.

Hezekiah's life was miraculously extended when the shadow on the sundial turned back ten degrees and he was allowed fifteen more years of life. In those fifteen years, however, he had a son named Manasseh who became one of the worst kings Judah ever had—prompting some to suggest that perhaps Hezekiah lived too long! But it's important to compare

Scripture with Scripture to understand the entire story of Manasseh.

In 2 Kings 21:1–18, we only see the wickedness of Manasseh. But comparing this account with 2 Chronicles 33:11–13 and 18–19, we find that after being defeated in battle and taken captive in Babylon, Manasseh repented, sought God's forgiveness, and was restored to the throne of Judah, where he reigned wisely for the rest of his days.

Eventually, the kingdom declined and the people of Judah were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon, the symbol of worldly corruption and defilement. For a few years the temple remained in Jerusalem, but eventually it too was stripped and burned. The walls of the city were broken down, and all the people were carried away into captivity. The book closes with Zedekiah, the last king of Israel. The king of Babylon captured Zedekiah, killed his sons before his eyes, and then destroyed his eyes. Blinded and utterly devastated, Zedekiah was bound and led away to Babylon.

Zedekiah was the last king Judah ever had. Later, in the tumult and confusion in Jerusalem during the Passover week when our Lord was crucified, Pilate offered Israel a new king: the Lord Jesus, beaten and bleeding, wearing a crown of thorns. “Here is your king,” he said.

But the crowd rejected Him. They meant it when they cried out, “We have no king but Caesar” (see John 19:14–15). Yet it was Caesar’s Gentile governor who spoke God’s truth to Israel by having this inscription written above the cross: “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (see John 19:19). The nation of Israel will never know another moment of genuine peace and blessing—either spiritually or politically—until the people see Him whom they have pierced and recognize the King who was sent to them in lowliness as Zechariah prophesied (see Zech. 12:10).

A Wasted Life

In the end, this book is a picture of a wasted life. The life of the nation of Israel is analogous to the life of an individual Christian. In order to fulfill our potential and become all that God intended us to be, we must build our lives on the foundation built by Jesus Christ, not a foundation made of wood, hay, and stubble.

Those who, in the secret places of the heart, fail to walk in obedience to the Holy

Spirit’s prompting will gradually sink deeper and deeper into corruption. The temple of the human spirit will become darkened and defiled. Eventually, cruelty and rebellion will set in, so that finally the temple of the personality is burned and destroyed.

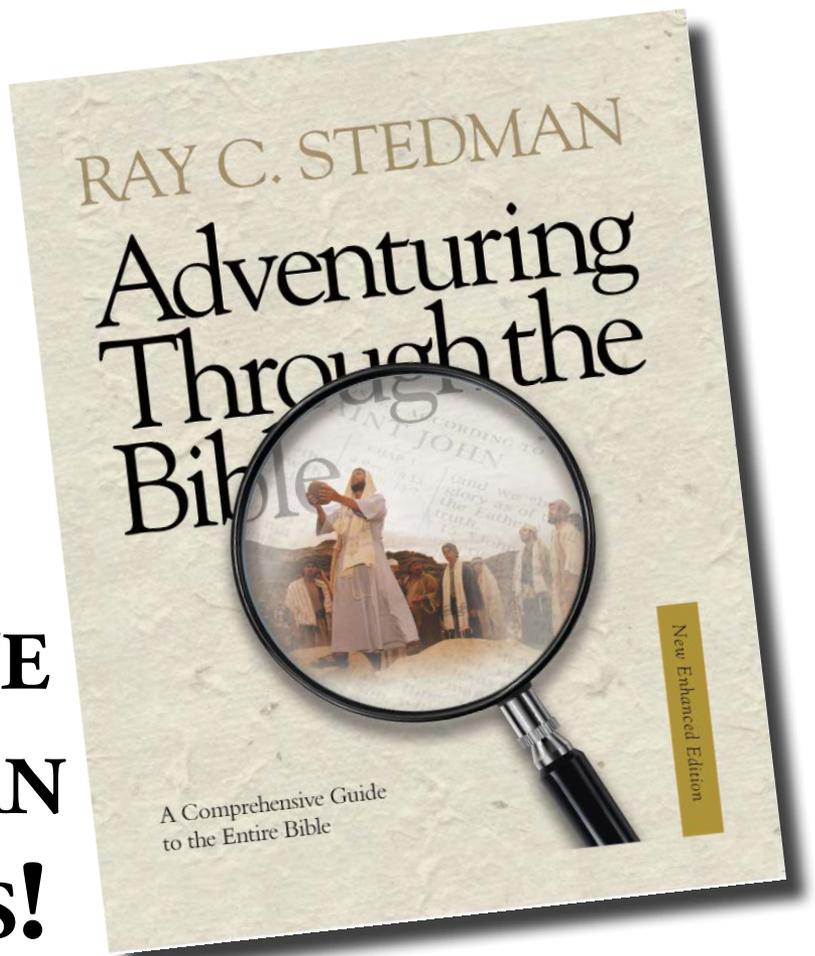
The apostle Paul tells us that each of us will face a judgment of fire that will reveal our work. The wood, hay, and stubble will be burned, and the believer will be saved, “but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:13–15). The lesson of 2 Kings is that it need not be so.

We may be prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, but God in His mercy continually interrupts the reckless course of our lives. He wants to draw our attention to the real issues of life and rescue us from our stubborn and willful ways. Like the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, we are free to ignore His pleadings. We are free to disobey. We are free to waste our lives.

But one day we shall stand naked and without excuse before the One who loves us and gave Himself for us. Will we hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”—or will we have to kneel and confess that we barred Him from the temple of our lives? Will we be glad at His coming—or ashamed?

May God grant that the lesson of 2 Kings take root in our hearts—and above all, that the lesson of this book change our lives.

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