

DAVID AND ACHISH

Lots of people know quite a bit about King David. They know he killed Goliath with a slingshot when only a youth. They know he was a shepherd boy, and a poet, and played the harp, and wrote quite a few of our best psalms. They know he had an affair with Bathsheba, and that this eventually evolved into one of his worst deeds (the killing of Uriah the Hittite). Not everybody knows that Uriah was one of David's best and most loyal warriors. And perhaps only about half of you remember the scene between David and the prophet Nathan. In Israel's best days, there was an interesting "team up" of prophet and king: Saul and Samuel; David and Nathan; Hezekiah and Isaiah; Josiah and Jeremiah. It was the prophet's job to remind the king that he was Yahweh's servant, and not just a loose cannon (or canon). Of course, the king had to have considerable humility and faith or this teamsmanship went bad in a hurry, as with Ahab and Elijah.

Anyway, Nathan walked in on King David one day and told him a story about two men in a certain city: one very rich and the other quite poor. The poor man had only one little ewe lamb which he dearly loved – it was almost like a daughter to him. One day a traveler came to the rich man's house, and, being unwilling to take a lamb from his own abundant flocks and herds, the rich man took the poor man's lamb and killed and prepared it for his guest.

David was enraged, as he was normally a man of both justice and compassion. He wanted to know who this was, saying the man deserved to die. At the very least, somebody needed to see that he made full reparations – four times over. As king, David had the authority to see that it happened. Then Nathan just looked at him and said, "You are the man."

Most of the kings the world has known probably would have simply killed Nathan at that point. But David was no ordinary king. He was a truly religious and faithful man, and Nathan had lifted the veil from his eyes. Sometimes we get started down a road, and one thing leads to another, and we don't realize for a while how far off course we have gone. Sometimes, as for David, it is a long and bitter road back to where we belong.

In any case, most people know that David married Bathsheba, and eventually their son, Solomon, became the next king of Israel.

Continuing the countdown: Nearly everyone knows that David united all Israel and extended its borders to their greatest extent, ushering in Israel's golden age – from a political perspective, the only golden age Israel has ever known. Only a few seem to know that this expansion and success under King David corresponded to a time of internal weakness and power struggles going on in all the great surrounding nations: Egypt, Macedonia, Lydia, Babylon. None of the great nations had their act together at the time, leaving a clear field for David's accomplishments.

Quite a few people remember that David and Jonathan (King Saul's son) were great friends. A lesser number remember the part that Samuel played in the lives of both Saul and David. Almost nobody remembers the story of King Saul and the Witch of Endor, a remarkable moment of kindness and empathy on the part of a woman who had every reason to hate Saul, but showed him what lots of you would call "true Christian love" instead. But that story is for this coming Sunday. Shortly afterward, Saul and all his sons were killed in a great battle between Israel and the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.

David is arguably the greatest king who ever lived (given the context and size of his kingdom). He was also a warrior beyond comprehension, fighting nearly all his life: sometimes in single combat, sometimes as head of a guerrilla band, sometimes as head of his army. Yet to our knowledge, he never lost a fight – never lost a battle. What an amazing mixture of prowess, stamina, skill, strength, and strategy David must have possessed! And of course, many of us would add: God must have been with him in a very unusual way.

David captured Jerusalem and made it his capital. Before that, Jerusalem (Jebus) was always a Canaanite city. David is the prototype for King Arthur legends, and Jerusalem is the Camelot of the Old Testament. Samuel is Merlin (if you're slow on the uptake), and Bathsheba is sort of a Guinevere in reverse. The Knights of the Round Table are David's mighty men. And just to confuse the issue: In the days before David became king – when King Saul was going mad and trying to hunt David down to kill him – David is a very Robin Hood kind of character. (I Samuel 22:2)

But of all the fascinating dimensions and adventures of David's story, the one that seems most obscure and least known (at least as far as I know) is the story of David's time in the land of the Philistines. The Philistines were, of course, Israel's greatest threat and her most serious enemy from the time of the Judges until David became the uncontested king of all Palestine. But did you all know that for a year and four months, David lived in Philistine territory and fought for and under Achish, the King of Gath? Despite this time of being a traitor and an enemy of Israel, David was able to come back as the Jewish king – first of the Southern Kingdom – headquartered at Hebron. Then, seven and a half years later, David became king over all of Israel.

It is an amazing piece of chicanery, fancy footwork, deceit, skill, opportunism, planning, and what looks like sheer dumb luck. I think you should know how thin the line was between David and disaster. I think you should know that David came within a whisper of losing everything and never fulfilling his destiny as we know it. I think "David's greater son" also came within a whisper of losing His destiny as we know it. But that's another story entirely. In any case, I want to tell you tonight about David and Achish.

First, the build up: Who is the antagonist? It is King Saul. How sad is that? Saul, David, and Solomon each ruled for about forty years. Saul became king in 1050 B.C., David in 1010 B.C., and Solomon from 970-931 B.C. (931 B.C., the death of Solomon, is the earliest precise date we have in biblical history.)

Saul at first becomes jealous of David, as he hears the women chanting, "*Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands.*" Some combination of madness, depression, gloom (bipolar syndrome, alcoholism, metal poisoning) overtakes Saul. He grows more and more paranoid, and much of it focuses on David. David, on the other hand, is enormously loyal to Saul, "the Lord's anointed."

Saul keeps squandering time and resources hunting David down. Twice David spares Saul's life when he could easily have killed him. Each time, Saul promises to "never again" distrust David, but his diseases, whatever they are, will not allow Saul to keep his own promises. Soon he will be after David again – when he should have been worrying about the Philistines, and asking for David's help against them.

Finally David realizes that it's only a matter of time before Saul corners and kills him. There is no place left to hide. At this point, David has six hundred men in his "Robin Hood"-like band. He goes off to Achish (where he had feigned madness before) and asks to be taken in (with his considerable fighting force). Achish is king of Gath, one of the five major cities of the Philistine Empire. I know you know this, but because it is nearly unbelievable, we have to be really clear: David swears allegiance to Achish. David will fight with him and for him, and clearly this will be the end of David's hopes for being a leader of the Israelites. Who in Israel will trust David ever again? For if he has gone over to the Philistines, a lot of Israelites are bound to die by his hand.

Remarkably, it doesn't take very long before Achish seems to trust David completely. He sets up David – and his merry men – on the southeastern border of his kingdom, where there are normally continuous raids – including from Israelites. And now he has no more worries from that quarter. Amazing. Achish gives David the town of Ziklag, on his southern border. Knowing what has been going on between David and Saul, Achish seems to assume that this is enough trauma and turmoil to guarantee David's change of colors.

Achish is happy that David is protecting his southern border so well. He assumes that David is raiding and marauding Philistine enemies – mostly Israelites. But David is raiding Geshurites, Gizrites, Amalekites (from Telaim to Shur and Egypt). These are Philistine allies. Secretly, David is protecting his Israelite friends (in the southern regions), and they are thinking of him as protector and friend, not as traitor or enemy. To pull this off, David and his men have a strict pact that no survivor will ever be left after one of their raids. That is, no one will be left alive to carry the news to Achish about what David is really doing. This continues for one year and four months.

Then the big battle looms up between the Israelites and the Philistines. This will blow David's cover for good. We will never know what David was actually planning to do when he and his men arrived at Mount Gilboa. All we know is that David marches off with Achish, who trusts him completely. And it looks like nothing will keep the cat in the bag any longer. But the other Philistine kings, seeing David and his men, are instantly alarmed. Six hundred good fighting men can easily turn the entire battle. They do not trust David like Achish does, though Achish tries to reassure them. Finally Achish sends David and his men

back “home’ to Ziklag, to await the results of the war between the Philistines and Israel.

Meanwhile, Amalekites, seeing all the men march away from Ziklag, have captured Ziklag and run off with all the booty – women, animals, spoil – including Ahinoam and Abigail, David’s wives. David’s men have also lost their women and children and animals. At first totally distraught, David manages to get his men organized and they march off after the Amalekites. They catch up to them, defeat them in battle, and regain all their spoil, including their wives. The battle lasted from the evening of the first day to the evening of the following day: Two hundred of David’s men were exhausted by the fast march in pursuit of the Amalekites, so they were left to guard the supplies. David’s remaining four hundred were outnumbered by the Amalekites, but they were victorious anyway.

Then David goes to the southern towns of Israel and widely distributes booty from this victory among the Israelite towns. While this little drama has been going on in the southern regions of Palestine, a great battle has been taking place between the Philistines and the Israelites on Mount Gilboa. Saul and his sons, except for Ishbosheth, have all died in this battle. Israel is in turmoil. With their army defeated, what will the Philistines do next? There is great fear and trepidation throughout Israel. Suddenly David has his magic opportunity. He has a band of fighting men, and he looks like the only protection possible for southern Israel. So David abandons Achish and comes back to Hebron, where he is almost immediately declared king. Two years later, when Ishbosheth (the last son of Saul) is assassinated (and Abner too, Saul’s commander in chief), all twelve tribes are united under David as their king. Hence, by the skin of his teeth (so to speak) David manages to duck the sword of Saul, hoodwink King Achish, and finally work his way back around to leadership in southern Israel, which ultimately catapults him into the kingship of all Israel.

One other little drama which we have no information about: After David did become the undisputed king of Israel and had unified the twelve tribes under his rulership, there was one obvious piece of unfinished business. The Philistines had won a huge victory over the Israelites at Mount Gilboa, killing Saul and all of his sons but one. The Philistines had been the major power contesting the land of Canaan ever since the days of the Judges. After David’s campaigns against the Philistines, there would be no further word of any problem with the Philistines until the

time of Hezekiah – three hundred years later. Obviously Gath had been conquered along with the rest. What happened to Achish? Did he and David ever speak again? Did Achish regret having shown David the strategies and tactics of the Philistines? Did David feel any remorse for the man who had trusted him – and saved his life – when Saul’s wrath was at its height? There is only silence on the subject.

And now, I hope you will indulge me in a little fantasy as we close out this evening’s class. The time David spent with Achish among the Philistines is indeed fantastic, but not fantasy. It is grounded in historic records. Not everything that we consider to be fantastic is in fact fantasy. That sometimes makes it hard for us to keep clear about what is fantasy and what is real.

In any case, I am wondering now: When you think about David, do you also think about Jesus? What, if anything, does it mean to you that Jesus was the “Son of David”? And instantly we are on the borders of myth and fantasy – yet not necessarily on the borders of make-believe. What is the prophecy? *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit...”* (Isaiah 11) Are we talking about King David, or “David’s greater son”? David has many descendants, many sons. But most Christians still reserve the title “Son of David” for Jesus. Interesting that so much has been forgotten, yet this is still remembered. Jesus is the Son of David. And most Christians still associate this title with what it portends: He is Messiah, the anointed one, the true King of Israel – and, as Son of God, the True King of everyone everywhere.

So back to my questions: When you think about David, do you think about Jesus? And when you think about Jesus, do you think about David? About a thousand years separate the two men, yet they are inescapably linked together in our traditions. David was one of the greatest warriors who ever lived. He ended up uniting all of Israel. Under his leadership, the entire corridor along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea – between Egypt in the south, and the Euphrates River in the north – became one nation under his rule. Speaking of fantasy, that isn’t even possible. Nevertheless, David did it.

What did Jesus do? Nothing most people can put their finger on. He is a warrior of a very different kind. Yet he has conquered and united far more people than King David ever dreamed of or imagined. Except the only blood He has shed is His own. Well, maybe that isn’t quite fair.

Many have *died* for Jesus. Many are still bleeding and dying for Him to this very day. But Jesus is not the one doing the killing. He is not that kind of warrior.

Have you ever wondered very much about what Jesus thought of King David? Jews, at least in Jesus' time, didn't pay any attention to birth days, but they paid a lot of attention to genealogies. If Jesus was in the line of David, you can be sure that His parents were not silent on the subject. We have lots of evidence that Jesus was very familiar with His traditions. He knew the Jewish scriptures well. He honored and pondered the heroes of His people, especially the prophets. So what did Jesus think about King David – His famous and increasingly illustrious sire? Did Jesus consciously say to Himself, "David was great, but I am not going to try to accomplish things the way he did it"?

Some of us are studying the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In it we are told about the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness shortly after His baptism. The second temptation, among other things, was for Jesus to "design his mission" after the manner and methods of King David. And the little fantasy I was mentioning to begin with: What would have happened if Jesus had gone for this second temptation? What would have happened if Jesus had decided to be a king of political and military might?

I bring it up because I have a suspicion that lots of people think Jesus would have been a failure if He had gone the way of a traditional warrior. He would have had no chance as a Zealot – no chance against the occupying soldiers of Rome. Lots of others did try, and their attempts and efforts were quickly squelched. It got worse when, in A.D. 70 – tired of the endless rebellious bands who thought that if they were just courageous enough, God would give them victory like in the days of the Maccabees – the Emperor Vespasian decided to end it once and for all. Under his son Titus, the legions of Rome marched all the way to Jerusalem. When they had finished, there was nothing left of a Jewish state from A.D. 70 to A.D. 1946.

So did Jesus refuse the second temptation because He realized it was hopeless? Maybe so. But it wasn't much of a temptation if there was no chance of success in the first place. Now, I know that lots of humans have been tempted into stupid choices that never had any chance of success in the first place. But not all of us are as prayerful and disciplined as Jesus. And besides, Satan had to take his best shots with Jesus.

It's an almost silly thing to say, but I have a lot of regard for Jesus – a lot of trust and respect for His abilities and gifts. If He had chosen to become a warrior-king like His great, great, great, great granddaddy, I think He would have been “hell on wheels,” as they say. I think He would have organized His following far beyond what the world had ever seen before. He would have been patient to wait for the right times, He would have been brilliant in strategy, and I suspect He would have trained His troops in discipline and tactics that no one had ever been able to accomplish before.

As a general rule, it is easier to organize humans around issues of greed, anger, or vengeance, and in causes having to do with immediate self-interest. It is harder to call forth loyalty and passion for spiritual growth, or the right worship of God, or the unity and worth of all people everywhere. It is hard to gain and sustain commitment for other-worldly realities. I do not mean to imply that normal military leadership is simple, only that the second category of goals is even harder. So what if Jesus had turned His very considerable charisma and vision and awareness toward the more traditional warrior-king goals?

I suspect that if Jesus had chosen to go in this direction, nobody outside His own followers would have had any warning of His plans. And when the right and proper day arrived, His followers would have struck in force – all at the same time, and all over Palestine at the same moment. By the end of the day, there would have been no Romans anywhere in the land; they were, of course, far outnumbered. All messengers carrying news to Rome would have been ambushed. Rome would not have even heard about what happened for months. Meanwhile, Jesus would have been uniting the Parthians, freeing slaves, and calling together those who had been dominated by Rome – all over the eastern world. He could have made Robin Hood look like a child playing with Tinker Toys.

By the time Rome realized that something had gone wrong, the legions of Jesus would have become far more than a match for anything they decided to send. Plus they would have been ambushed and massacred by tactics they had never imagined – and all along the way – long before they reached the shores of Palestine.

Well, why spend even this much time with such a fantasy? Just my little way of saying: I think Jesus chose His way of love and peace because it is the best and most powerful WAY there is, and not because there was no other choice open to Him. If He had wanted to be, Jesus

could have been an even more incredible warrior than King David. I cannot prove it, but I believe it. Jesus is not a wimp, leading people who are “afraid of a fight” into soft and safe places where they will never have to face their fears, their true selves, or their real problems.

I have sometimes wondered if there are those who so misunderstand Jesus’ true character and motives that they do not follow Him into the rigors of His WAY OF PEACE, thinking He is just afraid of the ways of King David. I suspect that would be what is called a major miscalculation – a major and serious blunder.

In any case, I have told you my Bible story for this evening. And now I have three questions for you. Some of you may be in a small discussion group where you are, or you may wish to pursue these questions in the conference call which will begin shortly. In any case, here are the questions:

- 1.) Was David a man of honor? Or was he just a very gifted opportunist?
- 2.) Why does David call forth such loyalty from his fellow men? It is said that there were few men in Israel who would not have died for David at the drop of a hat. And there are numerous incidents to bear this out. What drew men to David with such fierce loyalty and devotion?
- 3.) What causes humans to trust other humans? And how often does this work out well?