

April

April 1

I Samuel 1-3

I Samuel starts out with the story of how Samuel happened to be brought up in the house of God. Hannah promises that, if the Lord heals her of the inability to bear a child, this son will be consecrated to the Lord. This would mean that Hannah could not drink wine or strong drink during her anticipated pregnancy, and the son would be a Nazirite, never having strong drink himself or ever cutting his hair. I guess you can see the irony of Eli's accusing her of being drunk, as she kneels at the altar praying for a son.

How old was Samuel when Hannah gave him to Eli to begin service in the temple? She brought him "when he was weaned". Most scholars think he was probably about three years old.

In 2:11-12, we see a sharp contrast between Samuel and Eli's sons. This innocent child is to be brought up by Eli, who was a total failure as a father in bringing up Hophni and Phinehas. Two examples are given of the evil of Eli's sons: When they received the priestly portion of offerings, they wouldn't settle for the right thigh, as God commanded, but would 'fish' around in the meat for a different share; the fat should have been burnt up as an offering to the Lord, but was not. Secondly, the priests slept with women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting; this was similar to the pagan practice of having temple prostitutes, to appease the fertility god. God promised Eli misfortune for his sons---death on the same day.

Innocent little Samuel hears directly from God in chapter 3. He doesn't recognize the voice of God in the night, but Eli has enough spirituality to guide the boy, and Samuel gets his first taste of direct communication with God. From that point on, God was a regular visitor to Samuel, who heeded God's voice and passed on God's instruction to the people.

April 2

I Samuel 4-7

Did I miss something? In 4:1, it says, "Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines." Is this God's idea? If not, how can they expect to have success?

The battles go against the Israelites, so they decide to bring out the Ark of the Covenant to take into war with them. They treat it like some secret weapon or good luck charm. Actually, they need to be praying for god's presence with them (if God will support this Israelite idea), not just His symbol with them.

The "secret weapon" doesn't work. The Israelites are defeated by the Philistines, tens of thousands die (including the two sons of Eli), and the Ark is captured. When word gets back to Shiloh, Eli dies after hearing the report, and the wife of one of Eli's sons delivers her baby prematurely and dies in childbirth.

(Notice that the man who ran from the battle with the bad news was a Benjamite. Remember the murderous enmity between the Benjamites and the rest of Israel at the end of the book of Judges? All is forgiven; war unifies a country.)

The Ark in the hands of the Philistines exudes tremendous power. The stone statue of the Philistine 'god' Dagon falls before the Ark and breaks into pieces. Every city the Philistines displays the Ark in experiences sickness and death. The Philistines send the Ark back to Israel, to save their own skin.

In chapter 7, Samuel finally steps up to lead Israel; Eli has been dead over 20 years. "If you're really serious about following God," he says, "quit your idol worship and destroy those useless things. Then God will give you relief from the Philistine oppression." As Samuel sacrificed a lamb to God, consecrating the people to God, the Philistines sought to attack the great assembly of Israelites, but God thundered so loud that they were badly frightened; the Israelite warriors sprang up and brought a resounding defeat on the fleeing Philistines.

After the battle, Samuel set up a stone commemorating the victory and named it "Ebenezer", stone of help. See the irony in that? Back in chapter 4, the Israelites went into battle without God's blessing from a place called *Ebenezer*, and suffered one of the worst defeats in their history.

April 3

I Samuel 8-11

Why were Samuel's sons no better than Eli, his predecessor's sons? We know that even the best parents sometimes have children that don't follow their ways. I'd guess that Samuel was a workaholic and neglected his family; even working for the Lord can be an obsession that God didn't intend. Bringing up our children in God's ways is one of our most important jobs.

Though the people of Israel said they wanted a king because Samuel's sons were not following in his footsteps, we see hints in previous chapters that this was not the main reason. Israel has become influenced more and more by the society around them. They've been slipping away from the close adherence to God's principles. As the last verse in Judges put it, "Every man did what was right in his own eyes." God should have been their king, but they have already decided they want a "better way". The Lord tells Samuel to not take it personally.

It's incredible to me that the first king comes from the tiny tribe of Benjamin. This tribe was almost totally destroyed in the incident at the end of the book of Judges, when the tribe decided that they would rather stand up for tribal pride than righteousness. However, Saul has his good points. He's brave, determined, and his height *looks* kingly. Actually, God can do great things with anyone that will be *obedient*.

A few of the details of chapter 9 jump out at us. Saul was determined to obey his father's request to find the donkeys; this is the kind of obedience that God wanted. Saul was only giving up his search because he was completely out of supplies. Second, Saul would not go to the "seer" empty handed; the prophet deserved some kind of gift. Third, verse 9:13 says, "The people will not begin eating until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice." This is exactly the sin Saul fell into later---he took it upon himself to bless a sacrifice, when Samuel had commanded him to wait for him (putting himself in the place of the prophet). Fourth, doesn't 9:21 sound like Gideon, or Moses, or many others that God used mightily: "I'm the least of the least. Why would God choose me?"

In chapter 10, God gives Saul all sorts of signs to convince him that he has been chosen to be the first king of Israel, just like Samuel said. Samuel reminds the people that a king will be hard on them in many ways, but follows God's command to introduce Saul as their first king.

I can't help but notice the change God has made in Gibeah! Back in Judges 19, it was the center of sin. Now it is the home of a company of prophets and also of Saul. Is anything too difficult for God?

Saul has his first military test as king in chapter 11, and leads very well. **BETTER YET:** In 11:13, Saul refuses to seek revenge against the Israelites that had doubted his ability, and gives God the credit for the great military victory. If Saul continues in this vein, all will be well.

April 4

I Samuel 12-14:23

Samuel gracefully steps away from leadership of the Israelites, so that the king can have room to be in charge. Samuel will remain the high priest. The whole country, in a great assembly at Gilgal, affirmed to Samuel that he had been a righteous leader for them.

It still irks Samuel, and I suppose God, that the people have asked for a king. Being like the countries around them is a poor reason to have a king. They should consider God to be the only king they need. If we weren't sinful people, and obeyed God at all times, it *would* be good enough.

Saul leads the people into battle again. Though terribly outnumbered, Saul is confident, though he will not go into battle until Samuel comes to invoke God's blessing. When Samuel is slightly later than expected, Saul foolishly takes the position of priest and offers the sacrifice himself. Bad move! This is a signal to God that Saul worries more about military expediency than being righteous in God's eyes. When Samuel gets there, he lets Saul know that God has decided to look for a replacement.

I'm impressed by Saul's bravery, though. His numbers are meager, and there are only two swords in the whole army. They face a huge Philistine army with an abundance of weapons and with chariots. Saul's son is even braver, though. Jonathon decides, with weak evidence, that God is on his side; he and his armor bearer attack the whole Philistine army. God honors Jonathon's trust, and the huge army starts to melt before him. The rest of the Israelite army joins in the rout; the Philistines make a major retreat. God is looking to honor those who will do bold things for Him.

April 5

I Samuel 14:24-I Samuel 16

What is a curse? Throughout Israel's history, it had been something *God* said would be bad consequences of disobedience to *God's* word. Moses talked about blessings and curses, which were good and evil consequences, respectively, for obedience or disobedience to God. Now *Saul* pronounces a curse, implying that God will bring bad consequences on any who disobey *Saul's* command. People still do this today, when they say things like, "Damn you!" You can see why this is highly displeasing to God, taking on the power of the Almighty. It is breaking the third of the Ten Commandments, misusing God's name.

We've already seen, and will continue to see, how Saul readily takes on priestly responsibilities, though God didn't anoint him a priest.

Remember (14:50) that Saul's commander, Abner, is Saul's first cousin. It will be relevant later on!

In 15:1-9, we see the disobedience that was "the straw that broke the camel's back" for God. Saul plainly is disobedient to God, and God decides to change kings. It doesn't matter what abilities we have, for God can do great things with the lowly. The most important quality to God is obedience.

Saul had a monument built to himself. He's heading for trouble! Remember the ephod Gideon had made (Judges 8:24-27), and how it became an idol and a snare.

I'm a little puzzled by Samuel's statement in 15:29, that God doesn't change His mind. Samuel knows better than that! A key part of their history is the two times God decided to wipe out the Israelites and start over with Moses, but Moses talked God out of it.

16:7 reminds us that God is not looking for any particular physical attribute, but a heart of obedience. David's oldest brother looked like a king (tall like Saul), but it was David whose heart was kingly, ready to be obedient to God.

Ignore the flattery in 16:18. David is a shepherd, not a warrior, unless you consider his 'wars' with the wild beasts that tried to attack his flock.

Note in 16:21-22 that Saul drafts David into his army as one of his armor bearers. We'll notice in the next chapter that Jesse agreed to all this, as long as his son didn't neglect his responsibilities with the flock.

April 6

I Samuel 17-18

How old was David when he battled Goliath? He was just a boy! Let's see, he had 7 older brothers, only the three oldest of which were in the army. In Israel, you had to be 20 to be in the army. If David had 4 brothers older than him that were not yet 20, he might be 16.

David goes to the battlefield to bring supplies to his three oldest brothers. He gets there in time to see Goliath's daily challenge, and the spectacle of the Israelite soldiers backing away in fear. David's oldest brother reprimands David for even being there; what will he go home and tell Dad, that the army and David's brothers are chicken? By the way, when Samuel anointed David to be the next king of Israel back in I Samuel 16:13, it is pointed out that this was done *in the presence of his brothers*.

When David volunteers to King Saul to fight Goliath, he talks of how he has taken on a lion that had attacked his flock, even 'taking the lamb from the lion's mouth'. An idle tale? I don't think so!!! Back in Judges 14:6, Samson had killed a lion with his bare hands when "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him". In I Samuel 16:13, when David is anointed the future king, it says, "from that day on, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power".

With that same power, David takes on Goliath and wins, with a sling and a stone. The sling allowed David to stay beyond the reach of Goliath's sword. David grew up in a town very near the territory of Benjamin, where they were known for their skill with the sling in battle. (Judges 20:16, "Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.")

Of course, Goliath had promised that the Philistines would lay down their swords in surrender if he were defeated, but they ran!

In 18:17-19, Saul keeps his promise to give his daughter in marriage to the man that kills Goliath, but David declines, humbly saying he's unworthy to be the king's son-in-law. When Saul offers his other daughter to David instead, with the challenge of bringing 100 Philistine foreskins as the brideprice, David accepts and brings double.

King Saul becomes quite jealous of David. Samuel told Saul that God would pick a replacement for him, but he would like to keep his job (and all the fringe benefits, I suppose). Saul can see that God seems to really be in David's corner. In those days, if the kingship is not passed from father to son, it always means that the former king is killed.

Saul's son Jonathon and David are two young men cut from the same mold, and it's not surprising that they become inseparable friends. Remember when Jonathon attacked the whole Philistine army with only his armor bearer to back him up (14:6-14)?

April 7

I Samuel 19-21

Saul seeks to kill David. It's obvious Saul has figured out that David will be the people's choice to succeed him, though I'm not sure Saul knows David is also God's choice. Would Saul blatantly seek to kill *God's* choice?

In verse 19:9, it says that a "troubling" or "evil" or "injurious" spirit from the Lord came upon Saul. Would God do this? Sure, but when God sends a troubling spirit to us, it is meant to drive us back to Him. Saul reacted with violence against David. Saul knows that the best way to keep a non-family member from becoming king is to murder him (common practice in that part of the world). Even though David has done no wrong against Saul, he finds his life in jeopardy, and becomes a fugitive.

Side note: David's wife Michal (King Saul's daughter) helps him escape by letting him down from an upstairs window and putting an idol in his bed and covering it up, putting goat's hair on its head. We can't help but notice that there was even a household idol in *David's* house. The nation was easing away from God's commandments.

Jonathan and David are closer than close. Before David flees for his life, Jonathon makes him reaffirm their covenant of friendship, including a promise by David to never "cut off" his friendship with Jonathon's relatives. David keeps this promise after Jonathon's and Saul's death, by supporting Jonathan's lame son, Mephibosheth, for life.

During David's flight, he stops at the hometown of Samuel; God protects him in a miraculous way--everyone who comes to kill David ends up spontaneously "prophesying" with Samuel.

Later, when David seeks provisions from the priest Ahimelech at Nob, his is given holy bread recently removed from the Holy Place, and is given the sword of Goliath. Then David goes to Goliath's home town in the land of the Philistines and seeks shelter (who would look for him there?), but is not accepted and barely escapes from them.

King Saul continues his jealous pursuit of his rival, David, for many years, except for brief interludes when he comes to his senses. David, for his part, never tries to kill Saul, for he will "not harm the Lord's anointed". What a tough example for us! Though our enemies seek to do us all kinds of harm, we'll continue to do them good and depend on the Lord to keep us safe. Revenge withers your soul.

April 8

I Samuel 22-24

We see in 22:1-2 the beginnings of David's little renegade army. Of these 400, the inner circle was David's Thirty Mighty Men (actually, there were 37, see II Samuel 23), and three were preeminent. These were not trained army men, but more a guerrilla warfare unit.

David arranges shelter for his parents with the king of Moab, fearing that Saul will do them harm or hold them hostage to get to David.

Finding that the priests at Nob have given David assistance, Saul has them killed. He is now far from seeking God's favor! One priest escapes, and joins David's forces.

Saul pours government money, time, and troops into searching for David, who has done him no harm. The Philistines, in 23:27, note the distraction, and see a golden opportunity to do some border raiding. Saul interrupts his search-and-destroy effort to get back to the real business of the government, protecting his people.

In a twist of fate (that is, a Godly intervention), David is presented with the perfect opportunity to kill his kingly oppressor a little later. His conscience won't let him do it, but he does cut off a corner of the king's robe to illustrate to Saul how close David had been to him without striking out against the king. Shouting from a nearby hill, David tells Saul he wishes him no harm---see how near he had been? He could have killed Saul, as Saul was attempting against him, but chose to let him live. Saul is contrite, and discontinues his assault against David. David doesn't trust this change of heart, and stays in hiding.

April 9

I Samuel 25-27

Samuel is now dead. We've seen the end of the day of the judges, and are now completely in the era of kings of Israel. Notice that David is able to go to Samuel's funeral, since Saul is temporarily not seeking to kill him.

David asks for charity from a wealthy landowner, now in the middle of the bountiful season of sheep shearing. David and his renegade army have been in the region for a little while, and their presence has been a fortuitous protection for the sheep and shepherds. Perhaps Nabal ought to be kind-hearted to David for this reason, but that's just not Nabal's normal disposition.

Should Nabal be generous to David? Nabal had never asked for any help or protection from the renegade army, and David's men still had supplies, probably plunder from the battle in chapter 23. David's army was now 600 men. This is a key lesson for us: Hospitality is always expected of us, whether the needy are considered deserving or not. Stinginess is lack of faith, like saying God won't take care of *us* if we help others.

On the other hand, David had no right to be angry when Nabal refused him hospitality. Remember that the Bible is a spiritual history that refuses to hide the faults of our spiritual ancestors.

How does Nabal die? We are obvious led to understand that it was a consequence of his lack of hospitality toward David. I can see where it may have been a heart attack or a stroke. It's ironic that, though Nabal refused David any hospitality, David now gets Nabal's wife at his death.

In chapter 26, David decides to go into Saul's camp, directly to the king. Why? This doesn't seem to be a surrender, or a foolish attack on a greater force. It's exactly as it reads: David goes to Saul during his sleep to make a point that he means the king no harm. After the point is proven, Saul promises to stop trying to kill David---but for how long?

David ought to be safe in the land of the Philistines. Saul wouldn't think to look for him there, and besides, Saul surely wouldn't attack them without his top general against the Philistines, David!

David's band survives on plunder from attacking Canaanite peoples that were neither Philistine nor Israelite. (These were nationalities that should have already been destroyed by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land.) David tells the Philistine king that he has been raiding Israelite towns (a little white lie), so that Achish will think David is no longer an Israelite, but a Philistine.

April 10

I Samuel 28-31

What about this fortune teller? Can they really call up people from the dead? I'm not sure if evil spirits can do this, or if this was God's way of speaking to Saul. We certainly saw evil spirits speaking in Jesus' day. The result here was that Saul learned the truth of what was soon to happen to him, and it made him all the more afraid of the coming battle with the Philistines.

David had deceived Achish, one of the kings of the Philistines, into thinking he was a friend of the Philistines. When the Philistines prepared to attack the Israelites, Achish brought David and his 600 renegade warriors along. I have no doubt that David would have turned against the Philistines in the heat of battle, for he had always been true to his country, and even now would not raise his hand against King Saul. However, many of the Philistines didn't trust David, and Achish had to ask him to stay behind.

In the mean time, seeing David and the Philistines all with their interest elsewhere, the Amalekites saw an opportunity to make raids on cities bordering the Negev, in both Israel and Philistia. They were even so bold as to burn David's base town, Ziklag. David caught up with them and got revenge, with only 400 Amalekites escaping. All the people and animals that the Amalekites had taken were recovered unharmed. (I worried a little that the Amalekites might have abused the women, but then I remembered that warriors always kept themselves sexually pure until they returned home from battle.)

The Philistines overwhelm the forces of Israel in battle. Saul, seeing the end coming, asks his armor bearer to kill him, so he won't have to die at the hands of the Philistines. The assistant refuses, so Saul holds the point of his sword to his stomach and falls on it, and dies. The armor bearer *sees that Saul is dead*, and kills himself the same way. The Philistines win the battle. Remember how Saul dies---it becomes important in our next day's reading.

April 11

II Samuel 1-2

David indeed had great respect for Saul, for he had been anointed by Samuel as God's choice to be the first king of Israel. Though Saul had sought David's life, otherwise he had been a strong, unifying leader of the country. He brought it unity, integrity, and identity. Saul organized Israel.

A man comes to David after Saul's death, claiming to have dealt Saul the final death blow. He evidently thought David would reward him for this, since it was a known fact that Saul wanted David dead. Now, you and I know, from I Samuel 31, that Saul killed himself by falling on his sword and, when his armor bearer *saw that Saul was dead*, he also committed suicide in like manner. So, the man who claimed to have killed Saul was lying, out for personal gain. His reward: Death.

David teaches the men of Judah a song that praises Saul and his son Jonathan, to keep their memory alive. In 1:26, is it David or the country of Israel that grieves for Jonathan? Jonathan's love for David was wonderful, but Jonathan's love for his country was also great---remember when he, in I Samuel 14, attacked the whole Philistine army with just his armor bearer (and God!) backing him up?

David is made king over the biggest tribe, Judah, but Saul's commander of the army, Abner, installs Saul's son as king over the rest of the country. Battles begin against the two

armies. (In I Samuel 24:21-22, David had promised Saul that he would not kill his descendants!) After a few skirmishes and deaths (including Asahel, one of David's Thirty Mighty Men and a dear friend), a cease fire is called.

David doesn't mind a war against Saul's son Ish-Bosheth; he is not "the Lord's anointed" as his father was.

April 12 **II Samuel**

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding." Look at the mess created when Joab and Abner followed the ways of the world.

Abner was a career military man. It is not surprising that he believed the old saying, "Might makes right"; a murder here or there seemed very appropriate to him. Joab was cut from the same cloth.

It was understood that the immediate family of a murdered man had the right to seek revenge. Abner had killed Joab's brother Asahel (see II Sam. 2:18-23), though it seems obvious that it happened in war. Does "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" still apply? Abner and Joab had differing opinions on this.

Joab got his revenge on Abner, in the city of Hebron, which used to be a safe haven for accused murderers like Abner. Hebron had been one of the forty-eight cities of refuge set up by Joshua, four hundred years earlier. How ironic that Abner was killed when he returned to Hebron, after he had gotten safely away.

The city of Jebus had continued as an independent kingdom inside of Israel, even after the surrounding inhabitants had been subdued by God's people, because they had an impregnable fortress. David found a weakness: He had his men dam up the stream that flowed into the city state, then his army invaded through the large water pipe that went under the thick wall.

April 13 **II Samuel**

To the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant represented the presence of God. It was not an idol, for no one believed God dwelled inside the box or was small enough to fit between the cherubim on its top. It was a visible reminder that they were God's people, and He was their God.

In times past, the Ark was degraded to the status of 'good luck charm', brought out to a battle to assure victory. (It didn't work.) If, indeed, the very presence of God was represented by the Ark, it must be treated far more reverently than anything else. David and his troops learned this the hard way when Uzzah was struck down by God.

God honors those who honor Him. For David's deep desire to build a temple for housing the Ark of the Covenant, God rewarded him with royal descendants whose kingdom would never end. Israelites understood this to mean that a descendant of David would always be king of Israel, but we now know it meant that the Messiah's eternal kingdom would be established through David's descendants.

Not only does David provide for Jonathan's son Mephibosheth's welfare, but also indirectly provided for Ziba's family as well. Later on, one of them turns against David. Ungrateful wretchh!

April 14 **II Samuel 10-12**

Hanun became king of the Ammonites when his father died, and King David sent a delegation to this neighboring king with gifts, honoring him at his new leadership position. Hanun took bad advice—"they're just spies!"---and sent the delegation back with their beards shaved off on one side and a hole cut in the backside of their garments. This provoked David and the Israelites to war. Even if they *were* spies, don't insult them! Hanun could have just thanked them for the gift, not shown them anything strategic, and escorted them back to the border.

As usual, God blessed David in his battle against the Ammonites. Notice, though, that David always sent the whole army, not taking God's blessings for granted.

In chapter 11, David didn't go to battle with his troops as usual. I can understand this. If you are a leader, there comes a point when you realize you can be everywhere and do everything; you've got to trust those you've given positions of leadership under you. This frees you up to get *other* things done. That's where David went wrong: He used his extra time in a manner unpleasing to God. David couldn't handle idleness.

David was untrue to Uriah, one of his best friends. Uriah was one of David's "Thirty Mighty Men", and had been with him since the days when David was first hunted by King Saul. They'd been side by side in many battles, intimate friends. Now David committed adultery, intimate with Uriah's wife instead of in battle with Uriah.

Some of your Bibles have the phrase in 11:4, "She had purified herself from her uncleanness," in parentheses. I don't want to embarrass anyone, but just let me say that this was purification from her monthly menstrual cycle, and the timing required made it an especially fertile time of month for Bathsheba.

Why wouldn't Uriah, when called home temporarily from battle, go home to sleep with his wife? Remember that soldiers at war kept themselves sexual 'clean' (I Sam. 21:5), totally focused and ready for battle.

What did Uriah think when he was called home from the battle? We don't know for sure. I can think of three possibilities. First, maybe David missed going to war and wanted to hear all about it. Second, maybe Uriah figured out the truth. (He knew his wife was beautiful, and he knew the king grabbed new wives whenever it pleased him—see 5:13-14.) Third, maybe the king was just trying to ascertain that the troops had everything they needed.

When David sent Uriah back to the battle, he sent a note *by Uriah* to Joab, that Uriah should be positioned where he would be certainly killed in combat. Joab knew this was murder, but then again, wasn't Joab guilty of murdering Abner (II Samuel 3:26-27)?

In chapter 12, God confronts David about his sin through Nathan the prophet. David was the rich man with many wives, I mean sheep, and the sweet little lamb next door was Bathsheba. David correctly says that a sheep stealer should pay back his neighbor with 4 sheep---see Exodus 22:1, and so it happened that David would lose 4 sons: This first by Bathsheba, then Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah. David prays earnestly for the life of Bathsheba's firstborn, but learns that along with forgiveness there may be consequences for sin.

What about the law's penalty for adultery?

April 15 **II Samuel 13-14**

In chapter 13, David makes a second payment of four, you might say, on his penalty for adultery and the murder of Uriah. Amnon is killed by his brother Absalom.

Amnon has a lust for his half-sister Tamar, his brother Absalom's sister. It's not love, for Amnon is totally self-centered in wanting Tamar. Great is the loss for a man who has never learned the value of friendship with women. Amnon rapes Tamar, which enrages her brother Absalom. Absalom, however, is much better at keeping his urges in check, and waits for an opportune time to seek revenge on Amnon. In the mean time, he becomes the support for Tamar, since she is now ruined for marriage.

At a party for all his brothers, Absalom gets his revenge. Remember that the next of kin had that right if his sibling had been *murdered*. Was rape about the same thing?

(Note that the king's sons rode donkeys, as the Prince of Peace did on entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday many years later.)

King David grieves a short time over the death of his son Amnon, but grieves even longer over Absalom, who had gone into hiding, thinking that the king would not accept him home any more.

In chapter 14, commanding general Joab realizes that David will have to take the initiative to send for Absalom if he ever wants to see him again, and hires a woman from Tekoa to put on a little skit to help the king see his duty. With a little help, David gets the point and calls his son home ("though don't come into my presence").

Another two years pass, and Absalom persuades Joab to intercede with the king for a full reconciliation. Joab says a word to the king, and the relationship between father and son is restored.

Absalom is a fine figure of a man, well loved by all Israel. We already see, however, that he has a sneaky and conniving streak.

April 16
II Samuel 15-16

I don't know when Absalom got it into his head that he would try to take his dad's throne. He's slick, like his ancestor Jacob, who tricked his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright and blessing. Now that Amnon was dead, Absalom was second in line to inherit David's throne (though God sometimes skips over the obvious choice).

Absalom took a few years to charm the people. When the time was ripe, he declared himself king. Messengers told David, who made the decision to get out of town, in fear of his life. His whole household went with him, along with a goodly portion of the army.

Let's take a sidetrack here. There are many similarities in this story to the one about Nabal and Abigail, in I Samuel 25. In the Nabal story, David is insulted by Nabal, and reacts with murderous rage. Abigail brings him a gift of figs, raisins, wine, and bread. David's anger is averted. Nabal dies of a heart attack. In this Absalom story, things happen in a different order: Ziba brings a gift very similar to Abigail's. David is then insulted by Shimei, but humbly says it may be the Lord's chastening. We'll later see that Shimei is allowed to live. What do you make of the parallels?

It broke the hearts of the people to see King David fleeing the country. It seems Absalom had a strong following, but David did, too.

David sends Zadok and Abiathar and their sons back, to be his spies. He also sends Hushai, to offer advice contrary to that Ahithophel will offer Absalom. (Ahithophel was highly regarded for his wisdom.)

Ziba, the guardian of Mephibosheth, shows up without his master. Ziba describes Mephibosheth as a traitor, and David believes him. Should we? All we know about Ziba is that he always speaks with great respect for David.

The wise man, Ahithophel, advises Absalom to very publicly sleep with his father's concubines. Why? It represented laying claim to the throne, or officially announcing that the winner of this family conflict should be considered the rightful king.

April 17
II Samuel 17-18

Ahithophel gives David's rebellious son, Absalom, a very aggressive battle plan: Attack now, while David's forces are weak. Hushai gives different advice (David secretly sent him to confuse the advice of Absalom's 'wise man'), to take the time to gather a huge force before attacking. Hushai's advice is taken, so Ahithophel can see that his "wise advisor" days are over. He goes home, sets his affairs in order, and hangs himself.

Meanwhile, David's spies warn him to move his base of operations, and he is kept safe. The people in the surrounding area bring food for the troops, out of love for King David.

Absalom continues to hunt down his father. What a reversal! David had respected Saul, his best friend's dad, like a father, and would do him no harm, even when those around him urged David to kill Saul. Absalom has no such qualms; he would gladly strike down "the Lord's anointed". It seems Absalom's respect was reserved for himself, not God or father. The fifth commandment reads, "Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long." Absalom doesn't, and he doesn't!

David grieves deeply over Absalom. He seems to love this son immensely, though Absalom tried to kill him. Don't ask me to explain, except that God loves us just as much.

April 18

II Samuel 19-20

It was a solemn time for David. His son had died, and he had serious grieving to do. The succession to the throne should never have resulted in a civil war like this. This was a shameful situation. Joab, however, was more concerned with politics. He did not have the fatherly feeling for Absalom that David did, and was worried about the morale of the army.

David stops his grieving prematurely. He reviews the army, and greets his brave soldiers. He never meant to suggest that they weren't worthy of praise; he had just been an ordinary man grieving for his son. Sometimes even our highest officials have to remind us that they, too, are human.

When King David came back to Jerusalem, people and tribes tried to outdo each other in showing their allegiance. Where were they when Absalom was seeking David's life? I guess every country has its "silent majority", that doesn't want to get involved in the action.

In 19:24-29, Mephibosheth claims to have been loyal to David throughout this incident. However, back in 16:1-4, Ziba had claimed Mephibosheth had deserted to the other side. David wisely divides the family property between the two.

Chapter 20 tells of the revolt of Sheba. He thought he saw a chance to step into the void left by Absalom---obviously there were many who were ready for a change from King David. His revolt fails miserably. The more important aspect of the revolt has to do with Joab. David appoints Amasa to be commander of the army, taking the job away from Joab. Joab murders Amasa, then successfully leads the army against Sheba; then David puts him back in position as commander of the army.

Joab's two brothers were part of David's elite Thirty Mighty Men, though Joab was not. Joab was just as brave a warrior, but he had some unstable personality traits that kept David from completely putting his trust in him.

April 19

II Samuel 21-22

David asks God in prayer why He has brought a famine for three years. The answer: It's because Saul put the Gibeonites to death. You may recall that, back at the beginning of the book of Joshua, the Gibeonites tricked Joshua and the Israelites into an oath never to destroy them. Saul broke that oath.

David devised a remedy for the situation (not God). Actually, the remaining Gibeonites suggested that 7 of Saul's heirs be murdered to exact revenge, and David agreed. Though David had promised Saul not to destroy his heirs, this exception was politically expedient.

What might we have done, in our 'civilized' day and time? I suppose we would have either paid the Gibeonites a huge sum of money in reparations, or we would have held a National Day of Repentance.

Later in chapter 21, David goes to battle with his troops, but is too old for this! They send him home, for if he gets killed, they will surely lose heart. How ironic this is when compared to II Samuel 11, when David was physically able to go to war and chose not to, which led to the awful mess with Bathsheba and Uriah.

We see mention of four descendants of Rapha, very tall and impressive warriors. This was a generation later than the Goliath David had killed, but these four were still formidable.

David's skill as a psalmist (song writer) is displayed in chapter 22. Good stuff! Notice, however, that all the imagery is that of a warrior. Throughout his military career, God has been with David. Throughout the book of Psalms, we see many sides of David's relationship with God. The beginning of the next chapter is also an example.

April 20

II Samuel 23-24

Chapter 23 begins with a psalm written by David (verses 1-7). As contrasted to the psalm at the end of the last chapter (thankfulness of a warrior), this is a song of thankfulness by the leader of the country.

Verse 5 stands out like a sore thumb! "Is not my house right with God?" It's true that God has made a promise that David will always have a descendant on the throne, but GOOD GRIEF, it's because of God's grace, not because those boys---Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah--- were seeking to please God. They were as self-centered as any brothers you'd ever want to meet.

David has three categories of honor in his army, the Three and also the Thirty. Given the numbers we can count in chapter 23, the numbers must have also included replacements for those who have died (like Uriah and Asahel).

The Three, the top echelon, were Josheb-Basshebeth (also known as Ish-Bosheth or Jashobeam), Eleazar, and Shammah. They received the high honor by taking on overwhelming

odds of the enemy single-handedly (HUNDREDS) and coming out victorious. Abishai was of the same caliber, but the top three spots were already taken when he performed his valiant acts.

Names we ought to recognize among the Thirty: Uriah, eliminated by David himself to cover David's adultery with Uriah's wife; Asahel, a brother of Joab, murdered by Abner who was then killed by Joab; Ahithophel, who became a traitor to David's son Absalom; and Eliam, father of Bathsheba.

In chapter 24, David takes a census, directed by God. There was nothing wrong with this, but it seems to have become a point of pride with David---"I have this many fighting men!" Numbers don't really matter, but whether or not you are obedient to God. No number is enough without God.

David recognizes in verse 17, "I'm the one at fault, not these 'sheep'." I wish he had recognized that before 70,000 people had died. This takes us back to the concept of corporate sin versus personal sin. In what kind of sins are we at fault together?

April 21

I Kings 1-2:25

What a strange way of thinking! The king couldn't keep warm, so instead of just bundling up or giving more blankets, they get him a beautiful young woman, to 'warm him up'. I think they were also trying to see if the old man had enough "fire" left in him to effectively lead the country.

David's son, Adonijah, decided that maybe David *was* without enough fire to lead the country. Maybe this was his chance! He declares himself king, just to give it a try, kind of like running for president. (However, we don't lose our lives if we're not elected president.)

Evidently David and a few others had already decided that Solomon would succeed him as king, and now they were forced to go ahead and put Solomon in office. Luckily for Adonijah, his brother spared his life; Solomon only put him on probation.

(Just a side note: According to II Samuel 3:2-5, there was another son that had seniority over Adonijah. Kileab was David's son by Abigail. We can only guess that he had already died of natural causes long before this.)

Before David died, he tied up some loose ends for Solomon, telling him who needed to die if the kingship was to rest securely in Solomon's hands. Among them were Shimei and Joab, people that just couldn't be trusted. Also, Abiathar, who had given allegiance to Absalom, couldn't be trusted. Solomon stripped him of his priestly duties, though he let him live.

David's ways of securing the kingship were far from God's ways, strikingly similar to the ways of the surrounding culture, yet Solomon seemed to have an admirable tendency toward mercy. Solomon *starts out* well.

April 22
I Kings 2:26 - 4

Solomon cannot trust Joab, or Abiathar. He has Joab killed, and strips Abiathar of his priestly duties and privileges. Shimei, who has shown that he still harbors resentment for David's family holding the kingship instead of Saul's family, is put on probation, and is killed three years into Solomon's rule for a violation. The major opposition to Solomon is thus eliminated. To further secure the kingdom, he marries the daughter of the Egyptian ruler.

Solomon realizes that the earthly methods used to secure his rule are not enough. He appeals to God to show him how to govern. He needs wisdom. God is pleased that Solomon is appealing first for wisdom, and as a bonus gives Solomon honor and riches in his lifetime. *If* Solomon will walk in God's ways, he will also give him long life. We'll see how this plays out.

In chapter 4, Solomon's chief officials are listed. The only surprise here is Abiathar listed as one of the priests. I guess the list was made before he was deposed. Solomon, in his wisdom, divides his kingdom into 12 districts, with a governor over each.

Can you believe the daily provisions needed for Solomon's court? Here's the translation: 185 bushels of flour, 370 bushels of (corn?) meal, 30 head of cattle and 100 head of sheep plus other meat, and no telling how much wine it would take to wash all that down.

Solomon became famous for his wisdom. People came from hundreds of miles to hear his opinions and his knowledge of science. One thing he lacked: God had said he would have long life if he stuck with God's ways, but eventually the beliefs of his many wives eased into his religious practices. Psalm 111:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

April 23
I Kings 5-7

Solomon was commissioned by God to build the temple. It was a permanent version of the Tabernacle that God had told Moses to build in the Sinai Desert. Solomon makes a trade pact with King Hiram of Tyre; Hiram's workers will provide pine and cedar for this building project, along with numerous others Solomon will embark on. Besides paying the wages of the workers from Tyre and Sidon, Hiram asked that Solomon also provide food for Hiram's royal household.

Solomon spared no expense in the construction of the Temple. Much of it was patterned after the Tabernacle, but it was much more elaborate. What had been intricate needlework in the 'tent' version of God's house was not intricate work in wood and metal.

Verse 7:1 really stands out! It took 7 years to construct the Temple, but it took *13* years to build Solomon's palace. Notice the priorities. Also note that Herod built an elaborate temple for the Lord; it took only a year and a half, but construction on surrounding courtyards and rows of columns took about 80 more years.

Various furnishings that had been present in the Tabernacle were replaced with better ones. The old ones seemed to have disappeared.

We've read a little as we've gone along as to where the Ark of the Covenant was moved to at various times. Where, however, was that original Tabernacle at the time the Temple was built? At first it had been at Shiloh (See Joshua 9 and Joshua 18). When the Ark was taken out in a battle with the Philistines and captured, in I Samuel 4, it never returned to the Tabernacle, and so the old tent lost its significance. I Chronicles 16 and 21 mention it in King David's time, located at Gibeon. Once the Temple was built, nothing more is heard of the Ark's original dwelling place. I guess we can assume it just fell into decay.

April 24 **I Kings 8**

Finally the work on the temple is completed. Solomon calls a great festival to dedicate the building, two weeks long. There were constant animal sacrifices during this time---if the theme was to honor God, who could put a limit on the number of animals?

This is to be God's house. Solomon rightly points out that no building could be large enough to contain God, but this will be a place to focus worship, as the Tabernacle had been for the Israelites on their journey from Egypt.

The Ark of the Covenant has been residing in the oldest part of Jerusalem, "the city of David", for about 40 years. Its enclosure had been a large tent, though not the ancient Tabernacle (which was at Gibeon at this time). The tent had the generic name "tent of meeting", the same as the one Moses used in the desert for arbitrating disputes between Israelites and for prayer, before the Tabernacle was built (see Exodus 33:11). Nothing is said about what happened to this tent after the Ark was moved to the temple.

Solomon is as close to God and as dedicated to God on this day as he has ever been. God indeed is the ruler of the country this day, with Solomon listening carefully to do His will. This would be the perfect way to run any nation, but Solomon is sure to mention in his prayer of dedication that no man is perfect, and everyone has sinned. He prays that he and his sons and his country will always be careful to follow God's ways, but asks for mercy in advance for the times when the country turns from God.

Note that the Most Holy Place, or Holy of Holies, was a chamber 20 feet by 20 feet inside the temple, with its front wall being a curtain or "veil". The poles that carried the Ark were always left in place, and were long enough that they extended out of the curtain.

It's somewhat of a mystery as to what happened to the other contents of the Ark! When the Israelites had arrived in the Promised Land 400 years earlier, the Ark contained the 10 Commandments (still there), plus a jar of manna and Aaron's staff.

April 25

I Kings 9-11

At the beginning of chapter 9, God speaks with Solomon about the covenant between David's descendants and the Lord. It's clear that there is a condition to the promise, though it was only *understood* in II Samuel 7. If David's descendants will continue to walk in God's ways, the throne will not depart from the family line. Each generation must take up the covenant for themselves. In the same way, we now have a new covenant with God (new testament), based on Jesus' death on the cross for our sins. If we accept Jesus' death as payment for our sins, making him Lord of our lives, we will be children of God. Each of our descendants must take up the covenant for themselves. You can't enter the kingdom of God on your mother's or father's faith.

God makes it clear to Solomon that He will suffer no guilt or shame if David's descendants turn away from Him. It will be plainly seen by all observers that *God* is not the covenant breaker. Remember that Moses used this as leverage against God in the past, on times when God was so angry at the Israelites that He threatened to destroy them all and start over with Moses. "The people all around will say that you destroyed them because You were not able to fulfill your promises to them," Moses said, and God changed His mind.

Much of chapter 10 describes Solomon's accumulation of personal and government wealth. This is a bad omen. Yes, God promised to make Solomon rich, but does God ever intend our wealth to be kept for ourselves? Verse 25 says Solomon offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being three times each year. That was required, for the three great feasts. If you'll think back to the beginning of Leviticus, we are to give optional offerings to the Lord whenever we are grateful and have recognized that God has blessed us. *Three times a year, Solomon?*

Why did the Queen of Sheba visit? It was a type of spying, I guess. Was Israel to be feared or dominated? I consider that her great gifts were to insure against empire-seeking by Solomon.

Solomon made Israel a great trading nation. We'll watch to see if his arms sales to Aram and to the Hittites (chariots) will come back to haunt Israel.

Why does a king need 1000 wives and concubines? Well, he doesn't, but even in our day people acquire things just because they can afford them.

Solomon had been given peace from his enemies all around. Now, though, that Solomon is 'going to church' with some of his wives that serve other gods, God allows enemies to crop up. In fact, God raises up Rehoboam as an adversary that will take 10 tribes out of Solomon's kingdom after Solomon's death. Judah will remain with Solomon's descendants, but which is the 12th tribe?

Best estimates put Solomon's reign at about 1000 BC to 960 BC, forty years.

April 26

I Kings 12-13

With all Solomon's wives, it's surprising there was no controversy on which son would succeed him. I guess Rehoboam must have been the eldest.

How should the new leader start? One group advised him to show himself to be a servant leader, the other thought he should show authority. Jesus believed in servant leadership. Rehoboam chose the other, and BLEW IT. There were guidelines in place already: Honor thy father and thy mother. That doesn't just mean your birth parents. It also means honor your elders---you can avoid pain by not repeating their mistakes.

Verse 15 says the reaction to Rehoboam's decision fulfilled God's word through the prophet. Does that mean Rehoboam could not have chosen better? NO!!! God loves surprises. God delights in our choosing well.

We learn now, in 12:21, who the tribe was that sided with Judah in staying under Rehoboam's rule. It was the tiny tribe of Benjamin, the one that was almost completely wiped out at the end of the book of Judges. That explains the strange math in 11:31-32, talking about the 12 tribes, where 10 were taken away and leaving only 1.

With all the non-listening to the Lord going on, in 11:24 the Judahites *do* listen, and war is averted.

Jeroboam is obviously not the leader God had intended! He makes idols (golden calves) for the people to worship, sets up his own holy festival without consulting God, and builds an altar. What got into him?

In chapter 13, a story is related of an old prophet who hears of a younger one showing some spunk, really standing up for God and risking his life. He rushes off to invite the kid to supper, *knowing* that God told him not to take a meal in this land; the old prophet lies to him that "God told me you could do it." The young prophet lacks wisdom (we hope we can rely on our elders for that), and agrees to stay, and pays for it with his life. The old prophet learns that you don't play with God's word---don't take the name or the Word of the Lord in vain.

April 27

I Kings 14-15

Jeroboam set a standard of evil that would stand for the rest of the history of the northern kingdom, Israel. (Remember that after Solomon died, the country divided into Israel in the north and Judah in the south.) Time and again we'll see kings of the northern kingdom turn away from God; there degree of evil will be compared against the evil reign of Jeroboam.

God had said he would keep a descendant of Jeroboam on Israel's throne for as long as they followed God's ways. That didn't last long! God now sends word to Jeroboam by the prophet Ahijah that none of his sons shall live to succeed him. (Actually, Nadab reigned two years before the prophecy was carried out.) In fact, it is already promised that eventually Israel will be taken out of its land as captives.

Rehoboam, king of Judah and son of Solomon, doesn't do much better. He doesn't walk in God's ways, so God allows the king of Egypt to attack Judah. The result is that every bit of Solomon's wealth is taken away (14:26).

Again an ancient book is mentioned that was to be around forever to tell us the history of the country, "The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel". (Verse 11:41 mentioned "The Book of the Acts of Solomon"). We'll see another mentioned in 14:29, "The Book of the Kings of Judah". None of these has been recovered. Somehow the Bible lives on.

For the most part, we'll see that any good king mentioned usually has a long reign, while any evil king has a short reign. There are a few exceptions. The underlying theme is that serving God and following His ways brings blessings, especially long life. Why were some good when their father was evil? In those days, the upbringing of a child was almost entirely left to the mother. We'll see many moms mentioned.

April 28

I Kings 16-18

What a mess! King after king in the northern kingdom, Israel, chooses to turn his back on God. Their reign as king is usually very short. It's hard to keep track of them; seven different kings of Israel reign during the time of good King Asa of Judah. The evil they do is measured against the standard of evil set by Jeroboam.

Two things are especially important here. Omri builds a new capital city, Samaria, replacing Tirzah as the capital of Israel. Eventually we'll see that the northern kingdom of Israel is often referred to as just "Samaria". Also, prophecy is fulfilled in verse 16:34, from the time of the original conquest of Jericho, when the Israelites under Joshua first entered the Promised Land: Hiel sought to rebuild the city of Jericho, but it cost him dearly.

Ahab is the first king of the northern kingdom to actually surpass the evil done by Jeroboam. With wife Jezebel, full-scale worship of Baal and Asherah begins. God is very, very tired of all this, and sends the mighty prophet Elijah as Ahab's constant opponent.

Elijah's strong suit is obedience to God, as ours also should be. He wasn't afraid of any person or any circumstance. He held tightly to God in the face of an evil king, famine, and death.

After three years of drought, which Elijah predicted to King Ahab's face, God calls the prophet to return to Ahab. Don't you suppose the king is murderously upset by this time? (Side note: Compare 18:4 and 18:5. It's okay to kill prophets of God, but let's not lose any animals!)

Elijah meets Ahab, who blames the drought on the prophet. Elijah denies any responsibility. "It's *your* fault, Ahab, because of your evil leadership of Israel."

Elijah tells the king that he challenges all the prophets of Baal to a kind of duel: We'll meet on Mount Carmel, me against all 450 of them. Whoever can call fire down from heaven by their god wins.

They set up their altar. Elijah gives them 8 or 9 hours, and the government-supported prophets of Baal can't get the job done. Elijah's turn comes about 3 PM and, after setting up a simple altar, he adds to the difficulty by soaking everything thoroughly with water---imagine how precious water is after 3 years of drought! Elijah is obviously extremely confident in God. After a short prayer, God sends fire from heaven. Elijah wins the bet, and in the emotion of the moment it's not hard to get the crowd to murder the opposing prophets.

Elijah tells Ahab to go feast, for rain is coming. Ahab doesn't doubt the prophet now, and obediently goes to eat. The last verse of 18 is quite a thrill---Elijah outruns Ahab's chariot, SEVENTEEN MILES!!!

April 29

I Kings 19-20

Who killed the 450 prophets of Baal, 18:40? It's not 100% clear if they were killed by Elijah's hand or by the people, but it makes no difference to Jezebel--Elijah is responsible. To Queen Jezebel, they were her spiritual leaders, and Elijah becomes public enemy #1. Elijah runs for his life, which would be a perfectly normal reaction.

I suspect God would have preferred that Elijah conquer his fear and not run, but it takes a while for God to get his attention. In the mean time, God sustains him by miraculous provision of food and water. Verse 19:8 says that food gave him strength to make a long journey to Mt. Sinai (also known as Mt. Horeb), but it doesn't say he was fasting. I suspect he didn't mind grabbing some nuts and berries as he traveled along.

Elijah stays in a cave at Mt. Sinai. God says to come out, He is about to pass by. Elijah stays in the cave while a tremendous wind storm, an earthquake, and a conflagration occur. Then, in the incredible silence that follows, Elijah comes out. God meets him there in a still, small voice. That's all God needs, once He really has our attention. Then He gives Elijah his next instructions.

Is God's voice weak? Does He always talk to us in a quiet voice? Not in my experience! Sometimes it seems God shouts in my ear, or puts up huge warning signs. Surely you've also had the experience of God loudly and firmly telling you, "You need to get out of this place!" Sometimes it's, "Stop and help them!" Even then, we aren't obedient 100% of the time.

God provides Elijah the name of his next assistant, Elisha. (He left his former one at Beersheba, 19:3.) Elisha has the necessary kind of obedience. When Elijah calls him to follow, he says goodbye to his parents, destroys his farming equipment in the sight of his fellow workers, and leaves his past life behind.

God is not done reaching out to King Ahab. In battles with the Arameans, He sends prophets to tell the king He will be working in his favor. The victory ought to impress the king with the benefits of obedience to God, but Ahab is not willing to let God be *his* king. Since God remains in the position of *helper* to Ahab, Ahab misses a key opportunity to get himself and his country back under God's authority.

April 30

I Kings 21-22

Perhaps the most precious commodity an Israelite had was land. It passed from generation to generation. It gave them identity and history.

King Ahab sets his mind on a piece of land owned by Naboth. It is near the palace, and would make a wonderful vegetable garden. Just like some of us, when we set our mind on a new house or a new car, can't get it out of our mind until we own it, so King Ahab actually makes himself sick thinking about that piece of land he wants. Doesn't it become an idol to us?

An act of great evil brings the land into Ahab's possession, and God confronts him about it, through Elijah. The king shows sincere remorse, and though God's judgment will still occur, it is tempered somewhat.

After the great contest in I Kings 18 in which Elijah defeated and killed the 450 prophets of the false god Baal, you would think that Ahab would leave Baal worship behind. He loves his wife Jezebel, though, and that is her religion. When Ahab and Jehoshaphat (king of Judah) seek counsel of a prophet before going to war, Ahab calls 400 prophets of Baal and gets a favorable report---"The Lord will be with you in this." Jehoshaphat loves God, though, and asks to hear from a prophet of his own religion. Micaiah prophesies doom and destruction, but the two kings went to battle against the Arameans anyway. It's a conquest between prophets all over again!

As the lone prophet of God had predicted, the battle goes against Israel, and Ahab is killed. God wins again!

Jehoshaphat returns safely to the kingdom of Judah, and reigns eight more years. He was a God-loving king, but his reputation is tarnished by his association with Ahab and the sons who succeeded him. Hmm...I guess that ought to speak to us about the company we keep.